THE EXPLORATION OF ENHANCING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN OF DIFFERING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSES WITHIN AN URBAN CHURCH IN TRANSITION

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A FINAL DOCUMENT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
DAYTON, OHIO
May, 2009

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……..iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS……..v

DEDICATION……vi

INTRODUCTION……1

Chapter

1. MINISTRY FOCUS……..17
2. THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY MODEL……31
3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION…… …47
4. METHODOLOGY…… 141
5. FIELD EXPERIENCE……159
6. I AM THE PROJECT……...191

Appendix

1. CONTEXT ASSOCIATE AGREEMENT LETTER……....201

BIBLIOGRAPHY……203

ABSTRACT

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by

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The objective was to enhance relationships between the women at The Hilltop United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio of differing socio-economic classes. This was done to bring awareness to their valuable need for one another. The methodology used was women sharing their stories and gifts in small group fellowship. Qualitative research methods were used to develop, implement, and evaluate project. Data analysis included: field notes, journals, and interviews. Findings resulted in enhanced relationships among participants. Conclusions drawn were participants desired enhanced relationships, but needed someone capable of initiating and creating an environment that was conducive for them to take place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To God be the glory for all of the great things He has done. This doctoral of ministry process has been a valuable and precious experience. However, this would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and sacrifice of those who have helped me along the way.

I would first like to thank my parents: Dr. James Arthur and Dorothy Williams, my sister Angela Williams, my brothers James Arthur Muhammad and Dr. William Caldwell, my sister-in-law Sheila Muhammad, and my nephew Salih Rafiq Muhammad. A special thanks, is given to my mentors Dr. John Paddock and Dr. Robert Walker, to all of my peers and the doctor of ministry staff and Director Dr. Josephine Whitely Fields.

The preparation of this project included the work and participation of those who made this project complete: Hilltop United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio, Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio, my context associates, my professional associates, Dr. Henry Stringer, Rev. Michael Johnson, Dr. Gwendolyn Roberts, Dr. Pauline Puckett, Rev Harold Barker, Minister Tina Johnson, Omega Coleman, Berna Bell, Attorney Clenzo Fox, Dr. Patricia Cook, Dr. Steven Gill, Dana Blaine, Mary Lou Rozelle, and James Cain III. Lastly, I would like to thank all of the children of God who believed in me and continually prayed for me with signs and wonders following, as evident in the completion of this dissertation.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God and to my dear parents Dr. James Arthur and Dorothy Williams. Without their unlimited sacrifices of love none of this would be possible. Also, dedication is given in honor of the memory of my grandparents and great-grandparents who paved the way for us all.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is a book that explores and addresses relationships as a central theme. The theme of relationships and life are inter-woven throughout the biblical text. Relationships are what give meaning, vitality, and purpose to life. Genesis, the Book of Beginnings, is where the relationship between God, humankind, and nature are both established and fractured. These relationships are established in Genesis Chapter One and are fractured in Genesis Chapter Three. However, throughout the Bible, Gods persistent agenda to restore and reconcile relationships with humankind and nature is its central theme.

In the beginning, God created relationships. God created relationships that were intended to be in perfect harmony and cohesiveness with one another and with God. According to Genesis Chapter Three, the first man and woman God created (Adam and Eve) fractured their relationship with God and nature because of their disobedience to Gods instructions concerning life and relationship. This act set in motion consequences of their being separated from God, the author of life; the deterioration of their sense of self worth; and physical and spiritual deaths.

Despite the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God continued to demonstrate unconditional love for all creation. As a covenant of grace, God never strayed from longing for a harmonious relationship in fellowship with humankind and nature as originally intended from the onset of creation. Therefore, God created a nation known as Israel, whereby all humankind would be blessed. God established this covenant

relationship as recorded in Gen. 15: 18 between God and Abraham and his descendents. Covenant relationships are founded upon what we will agree to do together, and hold each one accountable. Covenant is the principle image used in the Bible to express the relationship between God and humankind.[1] Through the lineage of Abraham, the relationship with humankind and God is ultimately reconciled through Jesus Christ. God clothed in flesh in the personhood of Jesus Christ offers himself up as an atoning sacrifice (John 3:16 and Philippians 2:1-11) for sin reconciling the relationships of the universe, society, institutions, and communities back unto God.

The decline of the socio-relational and socio-economic state[2] of the African American community, as experienced by the researcher, an African American woman, presents a platform for Gods intervention. Therefore, it is the intent of the researcher to engage the theme of reconciling relationships through exploring its relevance and benevolence to:

- Women of differing socio-economic classes
- Classism within the African American Communities, and
- Urban Churches in Transition

Upon engaging the theme of reconciling relationships, the researcher notes that throughout her own life experience and biblical history, God always intervened in relationships. God reconciles relationships beyond the barriers of class, race, gender, culture, and age. This is evident within the lives of women in the Scriptures, including those of differing socio-economic classes such as: Ruth and Naomi; Hannah and

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[1]Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 8.

[2]Socio-economic class is defined as the difference between groups of individuals which create differences in their life chances and power. TheFreeDictionary; .uky.edu/commonInfoStudies/JAT/ Telecommunities/520/ accessed (February 12, 2009).

Peninnah; Sarah and Hagar; Rachel and Leah; and Pharaohs daughter and Moses' mother (midwife) etc.

Likewise, throughout the history of African Americans of differing socio-economic classes, God intervened in reconciling relationships between the: field hand and house-servant; domestic worker and college graduate; share cropper and land owner; as well as relationships between those of the urban, rural and suburban communities. After all, God has inevitably provided a guideline and an example signifying the divine intent for humankind to maintain relationships regardless of socio-economic class while living in community. The guideline is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and our supreme example is the earthly ministry and priestly reign of Jesus Christ.

In keeping with Gods longing intent to reconcile and to restore fractured relationships, the researcher has chosen to engage a project that would address this area of like passion. The African American community has experienced a great socio-economic and socio-relational decline that has resulted in the breakdown of its community, institutions, and family structure. All previously noted concerns of the researcher all speak to her passion for engaging her prospective project on enhancing relationships among women within urban ministries in transition of differing socio-economic classes.

The basis focus of the researcher's project stems from life and ministry experiences. These experiences have been influenced by the social relationships of African American women and their impact on her life and the progression of the African American community. It is the hope of the researcher that the reconciliation of social

relations between women of differing socio-economic classes will play a major role in the reconciliation of the African American community.

From 1619, the beginning of slavery in the United States to the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans have struggled for basic civil rights. Their enduring efforts to maintain community and a sense of self-worth have been met with great opposition, impeding their progress and annihilating their existence as a people. Since 1964, African Americans as a whole have experienced countless number of remarkable breakthroughs, from the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to the 2008 presidential election of President Barack Obama. However, the African American triumphs of the Twenty-first century coexist with the tremendous breakdown of their communities.

In his book, *Race Matters*, Cornell West argues that "the most basic issue now facing black America is the nihilistic threat to its existence."[3] As historically evident in the communal conditions of slave ships and slave quarters, the ghettos and urban communities of today portray comparable nihilistic characteristics. Characteristics that plague African Americans within the urban communities of today at an alarming rate are:

- Crime
- Single mothers and fathers
- Teenage pregnancy
- Housing foreclosures
- Substance abuse
- Unemployment

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[3]Cornell West, *Race Matters* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2001), 19.

- Gang violence
- Poverty

The core foundation of the African American community has been its institutions and neighborhoods. The structure and stability of African American institutions and neighborhoods have experienced great economic and social decline. These African American institutions include families, schools, and churches. The researcher has observed that there has been an increase in the social relational divide within the African American community on the basis of class. These observations support her passion and concern for the present and future state of the African American community as a whole. It is the sincere desire of the researcher to address the social relational divide within the African American community that has been induced by classism.

Classism within the African American community exists with the simultaneous increase of both the Black middle class and the black poor. The researcher proposes that classism is a major contributor to the nihilism and separation of the African American community.[4] These are devastating present day realities, in comparison to the economic and social conditions of the African American community, during the time of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's. Cornell West suggests:

> The impact of the market culture on black life has been devastating. As Stanley crouch rightly has noted, fifty years ago black communities were the most civilized and humane in America-highly nurturing, caring, loving, and self-respecting behind the walls of American apartheid. The market invasion, including the ugly drug invasion, has transformed too many black neighborhoods into hoods, black civic communities into black uncivil combat zones....As we enter the twenty-first century, we

[4]West, *Race Matters*, 22. Cornell West states: "Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.

> must connect the urgent black domestic issues to pressing class and gender issues in the corporate globalization around the world.[5]

African American communities were once closely knit communities where everyone knew and respected each other. African Americans lived within walking distances to their churches and schools. The Black church was the center of the community where a large majority of African Americans regularly attended. Although in social circles, they were not together. Nevertheless, regardless of their occupation, African Americans lived next door to one another. For example, the janitor and the domestic worker lived in the same neighborhood as the doctor and the undertaker. Domestic and other minimal wage workers had pride in their positions and labor. It was quite typical for the female domestic workers to ride the bus wearing their "Sunday go to meeting clothes".

On Sunday morning all social classes primarily attended the same church and had the same communal values. Some of the African American churches were known as white-stocking or class churches. An individual could be a sanitation worker during the week and the head usher on Sunday morning. The mutual struggles of segregation seemed to put every one on the same level despite their socio-economic and educational differences. Some sang a sweeter "back in the sixties" blues about how the community and the civil rights movement used to be one and the same, how people took care of one another.[6] Cornell West elaborates further:

> The new black middle class came of age in the 1960s an unprecedented American economic boom in the hub of a thriving mass culture. The economic boom made luxury goods and

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[5]Ibid., XVII.

[6]Paul A. Winters, *The Civil Rights Movement* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), 230.

> convenient services available to large numbers of hard-working Americans for the first time the civil rights movement permitted significant numbers of black Americans to benefit from the American economic boom-to get a small, yet juicy piece of the expanding American pie[7]

Cornell West contributes the decline of the African American community to the lack of quality Black leadership and communal relations among African Americans. West finds these attributes evident within numerous African American families and communities. Many of the households within urban communities are headed by single mothers. An alarming number of these households are headed by African American women. Presently, black communities are in shambles, black families are in decline, and black men and women are in conflict.[8] In this way, the new class divisions produced by black inclusion (and exclusion) from the economic boom and the consumerism of hedonism promoted by mass culture have resulted in new kinds of personal turmoil and existential meaninglessness in black America.[9] There are few if any communal resources to help black people cope with this situation.[10]

Cornell West credits the ingenious endeavors of our foremothers and forefathers for neutralizing the opposing forces nihilism in regards to the African American community. They endeavored to equip generations of African Americans with "cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaningless, and lovelessness."[11] The fore parents of African American ancestry found ways of sustaining community in the

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[7] West, *Race Matters, 54,* 55.

[8] Ibid., 56.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 23.

midst of adversity of any kind. They held on to and relied upon one another. They also relied upon the institutions that they themselves had established on the foundations of their faith and their integrity. The institutions of family, education, and the Black church served as major pillars of hope, nurture, care, discipline, empowerment, and love. African American women were key instruments in building and sustaining these institutions.

It is the objective of the researcher to target the relationships among women in this regard of their importance of being amiable with one another as to strengthen one another in preserving and building community. What has changed? Cornell West poses the same question in reference to the ironic effects of integration and the optimism of the sixties. West states further: "None of us fully understands why the cultural structures that once sustained black America are no longer able to fend off the nihilistic threat."[12]

It is the observation of the researcher that the cultural structure of the Black church in urban communities has the potential to strengthen, restore and revive them. This is a strategic position for the Black church to be in regards to bridging the social relational gaps between African Americans of differing economic classes. It is the sincere desire of the researcher to merge the communication, gifts, resources, and experiences of the middleclass with the urban/lower class. The researcher endeavors to develop a mode that will enhance the interpersonal relationships between the marginalized and the middle class. This will be done in order to enhance the productivity and the cohesiveness of the African American community.

One of the strongest influences made by any African American in regards to classism was made by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Dr. King was a Pastor and Civil Rights Leader that was dedicated to helping and empowering the poor, although he

[12]Ibid., 24.

himself was of the middle class. This is also the life background of the researcher whose passion for persons from all walks of life and empowering the poor is similar to that of Dr Kings. In his book, *April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr.s Death and How it Changed America,* Michael Eric Dyson responds to intriguing questions that pertain to the aftermath of Dr. Kings assassination in regards to the day present communal status of the African community Dyson declares:

> Martin Luther King, Jr. was Black elite who renounced the privileges of fortunate birth to share the suffering of the poor....King loved the poor and hated poverty. He never grew to despise them the way some black elites did....King was especially disappointed with the black middle class's refusal to toss in with the plight of the poor. He constantly reminded well-to-do blacks of their obligation to their less fortunate brothers and sisters....King took the black church task for being possessed of a religion that talked more than it acted. He criticized religion for adding to, rather than challenging, social suffering[13]

King compared sin to forgetting the poor. It is the objective of the researcher in this doctoral project to remember the poor, and to encourage others to do the same in a manner in a manner that is mutually beneficial to all classes and races of people. In regards to classism within the African American community, the researcher finds that the urban church is the perfect place for this mutual exchange to productively occur. However, urban churches in transition struggle to acquire and are resistant to social interpersonal action between differing classes and races of people within neighboring community.

Neighborhoods that experienced the forced busing of the 1970's also experienced the phenomenon of white flight among its residents. Whites moved to the suburbs in massive numbers as their schools and neighborhoods became increasingly desegregated.

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[13]Michael Eric Dyson, *April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. 's Death and How it Changed* America (New York, NY: Basic Civitas B*ooks, 2008), 119-126.*

Historically, this occurrence marks the beginning of urban decline within the African American community.

Neighborhoods began the process of urban transition whereby African Americans moved into the neighborhoods that the White residents fled from and middle class African Americans moved from old Black communities to the communities of the suburbs. Over a period of time, these same neighborhoods experienced a rapid decline in the economic and social conditions of their communities. These decaying conditions have gravely affected the wellness and stability of these once stable communities to their present state of urban disparity.

Historically, African American communities were socially cohesive regardless of class. Within the urban communities of today many middle class African Americans have moved from the urban environment and have socially disconnected themselves from the masses of poor African Americans. However, many of the middle class African Americans who once lived in these urban communities (before the forced busing of the 1970's), commute to urban neighborhoods to attend urban transitioning churches on Sunday morning. Yet, they often remain socially disconnected from the residents and the social and economic conditions of these communities. This same disconnect occurs even when poor residents from these urban communities attend the neighboring urban churches with primarily middle class congregations.

An urban church located with the community and not simply located in the community is an urban church that is socially connected to its' community beyond barriers of class and race. Although renowned surgeon Dr. Benjamin Carson suggests: "Class and racial prejudices exist and always will exist as long as there are people who

are physically, socially, and economically different."[14] Carson further states: "We cannot eradicate prejudice, but we can get rid of some of it and certainly help decrease its power."[15]

Therefore, it is the aspiration of the researcher not to attempt to eradicate but to engage classism within the African American community. The researcher proposes to analyze it (historically and currently), and to discover a possible method of reconciliation that will enhance social interaction among African American women of differing socio-economic classes within urban churches in transition.

When the researcher initially began her Doctor of Ministry program at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio her ministry context was Grace United Methodist church also located in Dayton, Ohio where she served as the associate pastor. Grace Church has a predominately Caucasian congregation that is in transition, located in an urban African American community. This is where the spark for the model of ministry was first ignited. During their Sunday morning Bistro coffee hour where coffee and refreshments were served to visitors and church members in a welcoming atmosphere, there occurred a great awakening that depicted the Spirit of Revival.

A new and fresh birthing of excitement occurred among the women of the church. The women of the church expressed the desire to bond with each other across socio-economic barriers in order to draw closer to God through efforts made in drawing closer in relationship to each other. This phenomenon occurred as a result of witnessing two

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[14]Benjamin Carson, M.D., *Think Big: Unleashing Potential and Excellence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 2008.

[15]Ibid.

women of differing socio-economic classes sharing their stories of struggling with depression and being a single mother.

Shortly thereafter, the researcher was reappointed under the United Methodist itinerancy to be the senior pastor of The Hilltop United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio. Hilltop is an urban ministry in transition that is primarily an African-American congregation located in an African American urban community. It was at Hilltop where that same spark grew and spread catapulted into a revival fire that manifested communal restoration, reconciliation, and the rekindling of inter-personal relationships among women of differing socio-economic classes of its participants.

The project of the researcher was further inspired by the existence of a cultural and. breaking socio-economic divide within and outside the walls of the urban church in transition that was within her context of ministry at Hilltop. The researcher was overwhelmed by the response of the women at the church, as a result of sharing with them the idea for her doctor of ministry project. The women responded with jubilation. They provoked an undeniable response for action that came forth out of their untapped inward need and desire for intentional small group fellowship that we will explore in this doctoral study.

Hilltop (as commonly known), was a congregation that was of a middle class mindset located in a primarily low income urban community. The church is located in what is called "The Hilltop" community. The Hilltop is heavily populated with multi-cultures and single mothers. African Americans, Appalachians, Hispanics, Somalians make up The Hilltop community. However, the researchers' ministry context (Hilltop) is to a large degree, socially disconnected when inter-relating with the members of the

urban community in where they reside, due to socio-economic differences. This social disconnect greatly effects the potency, production, future of any church that is located within an urban community. The researcher immediately bonded with the urban community upon her arrival as the new urban pastor. She did so by sharing her story and love of Jesus with persons from all walks of life, while going door to door.

The researcher implemented her doctoral project based on the excitement and the desire of the women at Hilltop United Methodist Church and her own life long experiences and her being able to bridge the social relationships of women across the barriers of classism. In her doctor of ministry project, the researcher plans to connect the differing socio-economic relationships among women within an urban church in transition through the methodology of them sharing their stories in small group fellowship. The reader can expect to find the implementation of harmonious fellowship like unto the early church, in accordance with Acts 2: 2 and Southern hospitality.

Therefore, the researcher is compelled to engage the Biblical, Theological, Theoretical, and Historical foundations of *The Exploration of Enhancing the Relationship Between Women of Differing Socio-Economic Classes Within an Urban Church in Transition.* In doing so, the researcher will give insight through qualitative research and implementing a model of ministry that will give insight to the reality and value of the participants mutual need and acceptance for one another. She will also demonstrate the significance of them sharing their life-stories, gifts and graces and engaging in dialogue with one another in small group fellowship.

The expectations for this project are: that the context associates involved (including the researcher) will:

- Discover a common bond that would reveal and produce a greater sense of self-worth for those participating in the project;
- An increased desire for inter-personal social interaction; the birthing of empathy and acceptance for each other;
- And the establishment of a divine connected purpose with one another.

The expectations of this common bond would manifest an entirely new level of understanding and appreciation for one another. This new level would produce unpredictable and unexpected fruit transforming and empowering all through the workings of the Holy Spirit. Through the methodology of small group fellowship, it is the hope of the researcher that women from diverse socio-economic classes and cultures would reap the blessed benefits of the redemption of Jesus Christ through this shared experience.

In Chapter One the researcher defines the area of ministry the model seeks to address. It will also introduce the reader to the ministry context in detail and provide a foundational explanation for why this area of ministry was chosen by the researcher and how the insight of the researcher bears witness on this aspect of ministry.

Chapter Two discusses pertinent literary resources that address issues related to Classism in the African-American community. The researcher reviews some of the scholarly work of authors who suggest there exist a gap between those of the African-American middle-class and those of the economically urban lower-class and the relevance it has to the Black church and the African-American community.

Chapter Three establishes a theoretical foundation for the ministry model. The researcher then gives biblical, theological, and historical foundations that are fundamental in supporting the theory of the doctor of ministry project.

Chapter Four describes the methodology and design of the model used in testing to determine whether the ministry model could be effectively used in an urban church in transition that would enhance the relationship between women of differing socio-economic classes. The qualitative method of research is discussed and the method s the researcher chose to use in collecting pertinent data to support theory: the field notes of the researcher, journal entries and interviews obtained from the context associates participating in the ministry model.

Chapter Five gives the reader an extensive view of what actually happened during the implementation of the ministry project. The researcher reviewed the data collection methods used; the data analysis objectives; and data collected which included field notes; journal entries; and interviews.

Chapter Six contains the reflections of the researcher on the field experience and presents a summary of the field experience. The aftermath of the researcher in her own theological reflection is expounded upon as it responds to what the researcher experienced as a result of the ministry project and the personal effects and influence it had on her. The researcher provides recommendations for future research and expresses insights that were learned from her doctoral project.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

The Person

The ministry focus for this research project is deeply embedded within the heart of the researcher. All of her life, she has been surrounded by a wide range of life experiences consisting of social interactions with persons from all classes, cultures, and ethnicities. Although, growing up in a middleclass culture, the researcher has always been intimately and actively a part of the lives, concerns, and needs of persons from all walks of life. The researcher has engaged these relationships through the sacrificial giving of herself and her substance. Mutual exchanges of understanding, acceptance, and giving would often take place as a result of these relationships.

Therefore, the researcher has become a multi-faceted individual, who continues to embrace diversity. Her understanding of the biblical examples of the ministry of Jesus Christ is the primary basis for her social interactions. A few of these examples come from the following biblical texts; Matthew 24:34-40; Mark 1:34-41; and John 4:4-10.

The innumerable social encounters experienced by the researcher have left indelible marks upon her soul. However, the researchers' family and call to ministry have greatly attributed to her passion and love for all people. The matriarchs within the life of the researcher have served as major role models for caring for the less fortunate and for

her strong relationship with God. At an early age she recalls learning and personally experiencing that Jesus loves all people unconditionally through their life and examples. It has been embedded in the heart of the researcher that she should also be an example to others, and empowering others to do the same.

The researcher was born in Columbia, South Carolina, and raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Her father is Dr. James Arthur Williams, a college professor of music. Her mother is Dorothy Bostic Williams, an elementary school teacher. Her siblings include: her sister Angela Williams and her brother James Muhammad. The researcher has inherited three main traits from her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents that have enhanced her social interactions throughout her life. These three traits are: a consecrated prayer life, a giving spirit, and musical abilities. Implementations of these traits have been extremely instrumental in enhancing her social relationships beyond the boundaries of class. Prayer, giving, and music were some of the key elements the researcher used in efforts to enhance the differing socio-economic relationships within her doctor of ministry project.

The researchers' parents, grandparents, and great-parents all had a strong faith in God. Their faith in God was manifested in the way they treated others with unconditional love. The researcher has witnessed many acts of benevolence and sacrifice they have rendered to people from all walks of life. The researchers' parents always welcomed others in need to eat Sunday dinner in their home. They also sacrificed to help many college students financially. In essence they provided family away from home for many students for over thirty years. The researchers' grandmothers, namely Laura Bostic and Ophelia Taylor Williams, would often feed the less fortunate. Many times they would

provide food for strangers and struggling families that could not afford to feed their children.

Laura Bostic lived on a farm in Effingham, South Carolina. She would often serve a hot meal to the traveling hoboes as they passed by. Ophelia Taylor Williams would take the researcher by the hand when she was a child, and walk outside to give the garbage men sandwiches for their lunch. Both grandmothers of the researcher were domestic workers and active members of their perspective churches. They were both very warm hearted and compassionately concerned for the needs of others regardless of their own economic state.

The researchers' grandfathers were faithful men of God to their family, church and community. They both epitomized sacrificial giving. The researcher's grandfather Clifton Bostic was a farmer who would give abundantly out of meager means to others. Her grandfather George Henry Williams, Sr. always filled out his tithing envelope every Sunday before he would leave home for church. Both of the researchers' grandfathers were also very musical as well. Clifton Bostic was known for playing the spoons and the harmonica. George Henry Williams was known for playing the piano and violin.

The researchers' parents are musical as well. Besides being a college professor of music, her father is also an accomplished concert pianist and organist. Her mother is a trained opera singer and coloratura soprano. Almost all genres of music were always a part of every family and social gathering in the researcher's upbringing.

The powerful prayer lives of the researcher's mother and great-grandmothers influenced her eagerness and compassion to pray for the needs and concerns of others. The researcher's mother would pray for hours at a time, especially during stormy

weather. Her great-grandmother Louise Cooper Law was known for praying and fasting in a time of crisis. Her prayers would have miraculous results. The researcher's great-grandmother Ardell Bostic would go from house to house praying for the sick and dying. She was also a midwife and a wet-nurse. Both great-grandmothers were farmers in rural South Carolina. They have planted seeds of prayer that have sprung up as a great harvest within the life of the researcher. Their life examples of the power of prayer have greatly contributed to the researchers' possession of hope for the possible reconciliation of any relationship.

Educational background and upbringing on a college campus also impacted the researcher's receptiveness to persons from all walks of life. The researcher attended public schools with diverse socio-economic enrollments. From her childhood, she recalls her parents commenting on how people from all walks of life knew and lovingly attached to the researcher in a phenomenal manner. The researcher's home in Tuscaloosa, Alabama was located on the Stillman College campus. She was surrounded by diversity with neighbors from all around the world. She grew up playing with neighboring children who were rich, poor, Chinese, Hispanic, African, Creole, Caucasian, and Indian. These social relationships were crucial to early social development.

Years later, the researcher graduated from Stillman College with a degree in music and a trained voice. After graduating from college she worked for the headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Investigation located in Washington, D. C., as a file clerk. While in Washington, D.C., she received her call to ministry. This was the watershed experience that revealed to the researcher that she had a special divine call to reconcile the relationships of others with God, and with each other. After years of urban ministry

experience, she embarked upon a full time ministry as an Evangelist traveling the nation and abroad preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the researcher continued her faith journey, she re-located to Dayton, Ohio to attend seminary. She attended and graduated from Payne Theological Seminary located in Wilberforce, Ohio. After graduating from Payne, she was appointed as the Associate Pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio. She is presently the Senior Pastor of Hilltop United Methodist Church (UMC) located in Dayton, Ohio. Hilltop UMC is the context for this ministry project. The researcher has experienced a deeper sense of purpose for her life and ministry as a result of experiencing the differing socio-economic relationships within her present ministry context. The synergy of the researchers' social relationships within her context of ministry, and with the social relationships of her life experiences, has led her to the focus of her doctor of ministry project.

Therefore, the researcher suggests: When intentional efforts are made to appreciate and connect to the differences of others, there are mutual benefits that will bring life to any relationship, atmosphere or circumstance.

Ministry Context

Hilltop UMC is located in a community that is officially named "Hilltop U.S.A." This community is affectionately referred to by its' dwellers as "The Hilltop." Vision for the inception of ministry at Hilltop United Methodist Church began in 1905. It began under the leadership of Reverend Father John Green who founded what began as Hilltop Mission. The first meeting was held in the home of Father Green, located in the Hilltop

community. The membership grew rapidly, requiring movement of the church to Wheatland Avenue. Father Green was instrumental in orchestrating the move to Wheatland Avenue. He died a few years following the move, and the church was renamed Wheatland Avenue Methodist Church. Under the leadership of Reverend Merrill Nelson, the mortgage was burned in 1947. In 1955, Reverend Frederick B. Clay was assigned to Wheatland Avenue Church. During his tenure, the church purchased the facility at 99 South Highland Avenue, and was renamed Hilltop Methodist Church. The merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church with the Evangelical United Brethren Church took place at the Unity Conference of 1968 in Dallas, Texas.[1] This merger formed the United Methodist Church.

Therefore, in 1968, the church was renamed Hilltop United Methodist Church. Because of its viability throughout the years, many former members of this congregation received their calls to pastoral ministry. Hilltop UMC has a deep-rooted history in being a vital component as strengthening and serving its' community and was a central meeting place for the Civil Rights movement during the 1950's and 1960's led primarily by the women of the congregation.

Hilltop UMC is now an urban church in transition that has experienced a great decline in the population of its active membership over a period of years due to major cultural and economic changes within the urban community where it resides. Though Hilltop UMC is located in an urban community, the members of the congregation that remain are primarily African Americans with middle class values. However, this is

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[1]Samuel S. Hill and Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 232.

typical of most urban churches in transition, due to the changing neighborhood conditions and residents.

Nevertheless, "The Hilltop" still has many proud longtime residents who have remained, often recalling how Hilltop was "back-in-the-day." Persons who grew up on the old Hilltop are affectionately called "Hilltoppers." Hilltopper Mrs. Emma Carter has lived on the "The Hilltop" for 102 years, and attorney Clenzo Fox is a member of Hilltop United Methodist Church where he serves as historian for the church and the community of Hilltop. Also, many large families lived on The Hilltop such as the Carter family, the Jones family, the Coleman family, and the Holiday family. Many of these families have roots in the 108 year old Hilltop United Methodist Church and are still active members of the Hilltop congregation.

The Hilltop community was a neighborhood similar to the communities of the rural South where everyone knew one another and were closely knit in their social relationship to one another. Several Hilltop residents had farmland. They raised their own livestock right on The Hilltop, kept their yards clean, valued education, displayed pride in being an American, owned their own home and attended the neighborhood church on Sunday mornings.

Some of the noted Hilltoppers have attained world wide acclaim. Most familiar are the jazz recording artist Nancy Wilson and Olympic Gold Medalist Jesse Owens. Jesse Owens. Other noted Hilltoppers include the Milwaukee Bucks basketball star, Michael Redd, and jazz saxophonist Rusty Bryant. Even today longtime residents of the Hilltop community express great pride in recalling the legacy of its community whenever the history of The Hilltop is mentioned. The Hilltoppers annually organize a homecoming

reunion and summer festivals, and maintain the Reverend J. Ashburn Youth and Recreation Center, located in front of The Hilltop United Methodist Church.

The Hilltop is presently a very multi-cultural and multi-ethnic urban community with a rich history. The Hilltop is primarily an African American urban community with a secondarily large Appalachian population. This community has drastically changed over the last forty years, ethnically and economically. These changes began to occur around the early 1970's due to the ordering of mandatory school busing in order to desegregate the school systems. Prior to the 1970's, the residents of The Hilltop were mostly middleclass two-parent families. Its economic status was stable consisting of homeowners, family owned businesses, department stores, and a very low crime rate.

Since then The Hilltop has experienced a decline in its socio-economic status and has grown in its ethnic diversity. During the late 1970's refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam moved into the neighborhood. During the mid 1980's Hispanic residents gradually moved to The Hilltop. The 1990's brought in an influx of families from Somalia to the area. The present socio-economic status of the Hilltop largely consists of high crime rates, housing foreclosures, substance abuse, homelessness and single-parent families mostly headed by single mothers.

However, when the researcher first began the doctoral program, she was serving as the Associate Pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio. Grace UMC is also an urban church in transition. It is primarily a middle-class Caucasian congregation with a few African Americans who are also middleclass. A few years ago, Grace UMC experienced an influx of African American children. The influx of these children served as a bridge for doing ministry with their parents, who were all single

African American women. Only a few of their mothers would attend the worship services at Grace. When they did attend Grace, the researcher observed a social-relational gap between the women of the congregation based on class and not race.

There were a few middle class African American women of the congregation who enjoyed social relationships with the middleclass Caucasian women members of the congregation, a further indication that class and not race was the main factor for the existing social gap within the congregation. The reality was the rationale for the focus of the researcher's doctoral project: "*The Exploration of Enhancing Relationships Between Women of Differing Socio-Economic Classes Within an Urban Church in Transition.*"

The prospective project began to evolve when a young, urban lower class African- American single mother, often isolated from the congregation, was absent from the worship services for three weeks. The researcher made a follow-up telephone call. She discovered the mother was in need of transportation to church. Consequently, the following Sunday the researcher provided transportation for the mother and her children.

On that particular Sunday morning, the researcher observed the urban mother sitting alone during the Bistro Coffee hour. [2]All of a sudden, something out of the ordinary occurred: a Caucasian, middle aged, middle class mother approached her with a hug and welcomed the urban mother back to church. The Caucasian mother gave the urban mother her card encouraging her to call anytime. Because of their social interaction, the middle class mother discovered her new friend was suffering from clinical depression in the same manner that she was. As the two women shared their

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[2]The Bistro Coffee hour is continental breakfast that is served at Grace UMC. It is intended to welcome visitors and provide an atmosphere of fellowship for its membership.

stories, a new social-relational bond began to develop in the midst of their fellowship. Subsequently, the urban mother never again sat alone during the Bistro Coffee hour.

As the researcher proceeded in meeting the requirements of the doctoral process, she was re-appointed by the United Methodist episcopacy itinerancy to serve as the pastor of Hilltop UMC. Amazingly, the concerning focus of ministry that existed at Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio was cohesive and relative in coinciding with the continuation of her doctoral work at Hilltop United Methodist in Columbus, Ohio. In regards to her prospective project, the ministry problem, passion, interest, and mindset of both congregations are the same.

Both Grace and Hilltop are urban ministries in transition having primarily middle class congregations that struggle with connecting to its urban community in which they reside. They both have women who stand out as being eager and willing to serve as catalysts in bridging the gap of classism within their congregations through small group fellowship.

The same challenge in reaching out to and connecting with the urban community that exists at Hilltop UMC also exists at Grace UMC. There are a number of African American children from the urban community that attend Hilltop. Their mothers do not attend and are disconnected from the mainstream of the social construct of the congregation when they do attend. When the researcher approached the women at the church with the idea for her perspective project, they all expressed a great desire to enhance their social relationships with one another.

This desire became more evident to the researcher when the middle class women of the church at Hilltop shared the story of how one of the urban lower class women from

the community first began attending Hilltop. One day a middle class woman saw her sitting on the steps of the church. She invited her inside the church to share in a fellowship in progress with the women of the church. This invitation began a process of mutual bonding. This social interaction between the two women exhibited a great potential for further fellowship on a larger scale and in varying manners.

Hilltop UMC has two outreach ministries. They have a monthly Senior Citizens Ministry and a Food Pantry Ministry that feeds residents of the community on a weekly basis. These two ministries are spearheaded by middle class women of the church. Although Hilltop UMC has these two active outreach ministries, there still exist enormous social-relational gaps between the members of the congregation and the members of its urban community. This phenomenon is reflected within the social construct of the congregation.

The congregation's social connection and evangelism to its urban poor is almost non existent. Also, the poor of the urban community are not encouraged to take on leadership roles or participate on committees within the mainstream of the church. The observations of the researcher are that the social-relational gap that exists is due to the onset of classism within the African-American community. The women of Hilltop UMC portray great potential for leading the congregation in bridging the existing social-relational gaps caused by classism.

Synergy

The researcher's spiritual autobiography reflects the lifelong path that has led to her present ministry context at Hilltop United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio,

whereby she has come to a pivotal revelation. The researcher now has a greater knowledge of the purpose of her existence in that her present urban ministry context is a catapulting launching pad for the next major phase of the plan God has for her life. In quoting Rene' Descartes: "I think, therefore I am;"[3] the researcher has been encouraged to adhere to deeper critical thinking concerning her existence relative to divine purpose. In now being more cognizant of her purpose in life, she is able to strategically incorporate all of her abilities, challenges, resources, and relationships which pertain to the totality of her life experiences in more profound ways.

As the researcher reflected upon her initial experience in coming to both Grace UMC, and Hilltop UMC for the very first time, the feelings of joy, and the very word joy, first came to her heart and mind. That is solely because the members of both churches said that the researcher brought joy, life, and the Spirit of God there in a greater way. This has been a testament almost everywhere the researcher has gone in life. What the researcher did not realize until the completion of her doctoral project was that she possessed and was born with the spirit of revival—the ability to bring life to dry places and connect people together bone to bone and heart to heart from all walks of life, (referencing Ezekiel, chapter 37).

In being a prophetic witness in the public square, the researcher has been able to influence both congregations to further engage in the same. The initial response and excitement of the women toward the idea of the doctor of ministry project prompted the passion of the researcher to increase her involvement and connection to urban ministry. It has encouraged the members of her present ministry context to joyfully and willingly

[3]A quote by the French philosopher and mathematician Rene' Descartes. Clarence L. Barnhart, *The American Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1956), 327.

participate in the doctor of ministry project whereby the intent is to emphasize our commonalities as opposed to our differences. Therefore, the joy and diversity within the walls of the church have further spread to the public square in new and more inter-personal ways as in the spirit of the old-time revival.

Characteristic of the revival fire of the eighteenth-century Methodist camp meetings and the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles, California, barriers of class and race were none existent. However in Twenty-First century Methodism, there are challenges in maintaining being of one accord largely due to the existence of classism in the church (particularly with the challenges of urban ministries in transition). However, the researcher has discovered through this synergy that it is through the increased interest in "the least of these"[4] that the joy and anointing of the entire church and community remains fresh, vibrant and potent for ministry that is to ultimately glorify God.

Joy and the Spirit of God bring life, light, hope, and encouragement wherever it exists or goes, even in and to an urban community. Urban communities stereotypically have a negative connotation because of the high crime rate, substance abuse rate, teenage pregnancy rate, and unemployment rate within these communities. A dark cloud then becomes associated with urban ministry. This causes urban ministry to also have a negative connotation.

But this researcher hears the melodies of a sound of an abundance of rain. God is raining joy and his Spirit out of the negative connotation of urban ministry. God is raining joy out of a dark cloud, and is encouraging a city that has suffered extreme job loss, life loss, home loss and spiritual loss by bringing joy where there was no joy, hope

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[4]Luke 9:48 (Serendipity Bible).

where there was no hope, and encouragement where there was not encouragement. The darker the cloud forms, the more abundant the rain falls. The darker the condition of a community exists, the brighter the light of Christ has the opportunity to shine within it.

Now that God has brought the researcher to "The Hilltop" this same joy and Spirit has ignited the Spirit of Revival among the members of the church, compelling them to draw closer to Jesus, to each other, and to embrace the least of these. We are increasing our embrace of other cultures and ethnic groups of people within the community.

The onset of this doctoral project began with just a spark of hope arising from the researcher that has further kindled the flame of her ministry context. This flame has now emerged into the spreading of an uncontrollable Revival Fire that is being a prophetic witness in the public square. This indicates to the researcher that this is an opened book that is to continue to unfold by revealing and manifesting new volumes, sequels, and chapters that will speak to the continuance of the researchers' journey with God and Gods' people.

In the following chapter, the researcher presents a summation of scholarly insights that have influenced her journey thus far as pertaining to the applied literary resources of this doctor of ministry project.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY MODEL

In this chapter a literary review of such noted authors will inform the reader of pertinent writings that give voice to the relative issues and concern of classism within the African-American community. Classism within the African-American community is an existing reality that is a taboo subject for many African-Americans. It is dealt with as a neglected socio-religious issue. Noted by the New York Times[1] as being a major contributor to the subject of classism within the African-American community, Lawrence Otis Graham in his book *Our Kind of People Inside America's Black Upper Class*[2] uncovers the interior makeup of the black elite social society in America. He brought to our attention a startling reality and opened an enormous can of worms.[3] It spoke to what has been considered by many to be a political and social hot potato.[4]

Author Susanna Walker inter-relates skin color to the issues of class within African American culture in her innovative book *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to*

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[1]Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2000), back cover.

[2]Ibid., x.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., ix.

African American Women. 1920-1975.[5] Walker addresses this topic from a historical and theoretical point of view. Walker explains how skin color has coincided with how one is treated and viewed by others within the African American community.[6] However, these neglected issues have been profoundly addressed by a number of authors who have uncovered this phenomenon. Skin color has been used to classify African Americans according to social status even within the Black church.

Historically, Dr. William Edward Burghart Du Bois writes in his 1903 rendition of *The Souls of Black Folk*[7] with great urgency to the African American community. Du Bois suggests Negroes should make sacrifices in aiding the disadvantaged as to create a just social order.[8] Du Bois was one of the earlier writers to address the contributing factors of classism as it affects the whole of the African American community. Yet the innovative writing of E. Franklin Frazier's B*lack Bourgeoisie*[9] is credited for being the book that brought shock of self-revelation to middle-class Blacks in America.[10]

In reference to the progression of the African-American community, Dr. Bill Cosby collaborates with Dr. Alvin F. Poussant, M.D. in their authorship of *Come On People: on the Path from Victims to Victors.*[11] In this controversial book, Cosby and

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[5]Susanna Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 82, 83.

[6]Ibid., 2.

[7]W.E.B. Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Signet Classics, New American Library, 1969), 25.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Franklin E. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1957), back cover.

[10]Ibid.

[11]William H. Cosby and Alvin Poussant, M.D., *Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

Poussant seek to motivate and to enable African Americans to create better communities that dissipate the barriers in our society that are detrimental to the progress of the poor by not giving up the struggle to eradicate racism and classism in our society.[12]

In an interview with Frontline's June Cross entitled "The Two Nations of Black America,"[13]Cross is in dialogue with theologian Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as Gates critiques issues concerning the effects of a socio-economic divide due to the effects of classism upon the African American community. Gates raises probing questions that address socio-economic statistics, suggesting that the African American community is in a state of emergency.

Gates seeks to expound on the effects of classism upon the African American community at large and addresses issues concerning the divide between middle and lower-class African-Americans and the historical context from which they have evolved. Gates makes it very clear in his interview that he is grossly disturbed by the present economic and social status of the African American community. Gates declares that the future state and present progression of the African American community should be a major priority for all African Americans.

Prior to Gates' interview with June Cross, Gates collaborated with close colleague Dr. Cornell West in his publication T*he Future of the Race.*[14] Gates and West recap the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of the talented tenth as it impacts the African

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[12]Ibid., xviii.

[13]1998 interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., African American Sites: *Frontline, "The Two Nations of Black America."* http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/interviews/gates.html; Internet; (accessed 19 November 2007).

[14]Henry Louis Gates and Cornell West, *The Future of the Race* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1996), back cover.

American future.[15] In the book entitled *Liberating Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African-American Thought*[16] author Robert Michael Franklin unfolds the paradigms that have historically shaped the moral development of African American leaders. Franklin explores their respective visions for the good of society bearing witness to their theological, political, and moral reflections.

In his writings Franklin explores pertinent debates that are relative to this doctoral project. Franklin proposes that Du Bois saw the achievement of the Negro being obtained through political empowerment and scholastic excellence. As opposed to Du Bois, Booker T. Washington envisioned the hope of the Negro race being based on self-actualization independent of the political arena. Franklin suggests Washington envisioned an authentically free person resulting by their emphasis on vocation as a Puritan work ethic and their virtues associated with adapting personal interests to community needs.

Cultural influences have also infiltrated the history of the African American experience and are currently influencing the present state and mindset of its community. Relative to the cultural aspects of classism within the African American community, author Lewis Baldwin in his book, *There Is a Balm In Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King. Jr.* [17] illustrates how the Southern African American cultural roots of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. played an important role his solid cultural foundation.

This solid cultural foundation influenced his effectiveness as a preacher and social activist. King's early experiences of racism and classism gave fuel to his passion,

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Robert Michael Franklin, *Liberating Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African-American Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 21.

[17]Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: the Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 16.

empathy, and accountability for the condition of his people and his vision of a "new South."[18] Dr. King's spiritual autobiography is evidently kindred to that of the researcher. Both have borne and are yet bearing fruits of ministry that stem from the merging of their Southern cultural roots and advanced theological education. Baldwin expounds:

> Important in the shaping of King's sense of place was the social significance of food and eating. His early development occurred in a place where food and eating played a central part in creating and maintaining community. . . . King's mother Alberta was known for her delicious "down-home" cooking, especially "soul food," and so was his maternal grandmother, Jennies C. Parks Williams. . . . The symbolic significance of food and eating and their relationship to place in a southern context must have struck King with great force for a number of reasons, aside from the simple fact that feasts strengthened communal values and social relationships.[19]

Author Psyche A. Williams-Forson does an exposition of how food plays a role in shaping the values within the cultural lives of women. This aspect of African American culture was a major component in the effectiveness of this researcher's model of ministry. [20] Forson deals specifically with the unique aspects of the African American cooking traditions. In doing so, she gives reference to their culinary theological significances as indicated in her explanation of the "gospel bird"[21] and "the big piece of chicken." [22]

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 34, 35.

[20]Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 5.

[21]The gospel bird is a phrase coined in the African-American community that serves as a nickname for fried chicken. It is traditionally served for Sunday dinner, primarily in the Southern United States.

[22]The big piece of chicken is a phrase coined in the African American community that refers to the largest portion of the chicken served. Traditionally, it is the breast of the chicken and is served to the male head of the household or the visiting preacher.

Also, Miriam Meyers in her book *A Bite of Big Mama's Plate*[23] explores various sources through interview, memoirs, and focus groups in showing how food benefits beyond being a source of nutrition. She brings insight to food being a valuable resource for the mind, body, and soul, while emphasizing the aspects of the African American tradition of soul food. Author Katrina Bell goes further to address the cultural values of African American women by examining their relationship with one another on the basis of class and identity. Bell researches the nature of the discords, commonalities, schisms, and the practice of black sisterhood. She profoundly states:

> What I believe is most valuable about this research is the realization it potentially brings to black women about the differences—and particularly the lack of differences—among them. If the nearly one-third of study women who expressed serious doubt about black women ever truly coming together have based their angst on inflated ideas about class discord, then this research helps to bring them hope.[24]

Bell has innovatively given an antidote for repairing the breaches made by classism among women of differing socio-economic classes within the African American community. Her research allows for self-evaluation, repentance, and a new attitude to take place within the heart of the reader.

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[23]Miriam Meyers, *A Bite off Big Mama's Plate* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), back cover.

[24]Katrina Bell McDonald, *Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity, and Contemporary Black Women* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 179.

Relative to urban ministry, the book *Bridges out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities*[25] by author and sociologist Ruby Payne lays out theoretical strategies for bridging the social relational gaps caused by classism. Payne helps the readers to understand the people they serve from all walks of life, in any capacity whether it be in the work place, or the church. In the noted book: *Urban Churches in Transition*[26], theologian Walter E. Ziegenhals addresses the changing situations and the problems that occur within urban ministries in transition. Ziegenhals states: "Churches in transition will be with us as long as there are communities in transition."[27] The changes within the communities have a direct effect upon the churches within those communities. Ziegenhals explains this phenomenon in detail, based upon his personal pastoral experiences.

Also, Dr. Marvin McMickle has written a book that thoroughly engages issues pertaining to classism as it relates specifically to the Black urban church. His book is entitled: *Preaching to the Black Middle Class: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope*[28] McMickle profoundly introduces the reader to issues and dynamics that contributed to the rise and history of the Black middleclass. McMickle addresses the status and condition of the Black middleclass as they relate to the Black church and their community. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. notes that McMickle's literary work is a powerful and innovative blessing for

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[25]Ruby K. Payne, Phillip E. De Vol and Terie Dreusi Smith, *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professional and Communities* (Highlands, TX: aha! Process Inc., 2001), 6.

[26] Walter E. Ziegenhals, *Urban Churches in Transition* (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1978), 10.

[27]Ibid., cover.

[28]Marvin McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middleclass: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), xi.

the new millennium.[29] Most relevant to the ministry project, McMickle addresses preaching to the congregations within the urban context as they coexist in the pews with middle-class commuters and the underclass residents of the immediate neighborhood.

Additional literatures that dynamically speak to issues that are of relevance to the plight of urban ministry are, editor Gina Dent and author David Claerbaut. Gina Dent declares that the repertoires of urban black popular culture have influenced a redefinition of the term urban. These repertoires are namely: style, music, body as canvas, and the city being hip. "The city is where black popular styles are born—especially clothing and hairstyles." [30] All of these social elements and much ore influence ministry in the urban context culturally, ethnically, and economically.

David Claerbaut suggests: "If the church is to take its mandate seriously, it will have to transcend social barriers—racial, economic, linguistic, cultural, sexual, and age—in order to meet the challenges" that face urban ministry.[31] Claurbaut further suggests that in order for the church to do this kind of reconciling, the church must go to people where they are.[32] However, Claerbaut finds efforts of reconciliation difficult because of the heavy migration of middle class city dwellers to the suburbs. Claerbaut indicates that when this migration occurs, the poor move into the community, and when years later those of middleclass try to do missionary work in the urban community they are vaguely respected by the poor that now dwell in the community. However, Claerbaut states,

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[29]Ibid., back cover.

[30]Gina Dent, *Black Popular Culture* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1983), 158.

[31]David Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 25.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

"When the church does demonstrate genuine social commitment, its spiritual message gains credibility in that scriptural mandate is both spiritual and social reconciliation."[33]

Author and theologian Anthony Pinn deals with the historical context of the Black Church's role in social activism. In his book, *the Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era,* Pinn discusses major historical and contemporary themes that are relative to the theology of the Black Church. Pinn describes these themes of the Black Church as well the major beliefs and forms of worship that define its' tradition. He then focuses on the practices of the Black Church, especially as it has engaged issues of economic development and justice, and struggles with such issues as the full inclusion of women, sexuality, and health.[34]

Pinn suggests that for the Black Church, tension exists between the "spiritual" concerns and the "mundane" concerns of the Black community. Pinn points out that the dynamic and mission of the Black Church is not merely spiritual, but is shaped by its own community. Pinn elaborates by saying : "Scholars of black American religious history such Carter Woodson, Benjamin Mays, and C. Eric Lincoln have argued the importance of the Black church in the development of black communities and their civil rights, some going as far as to label it the lifeblood of the collective community."[35] These scholars have been instrumental leaders in addressing the socio-economic disparities of the Black community as social activist. They have also made major contributions towards the educational and political progression of the African American community.

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[34]Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), back cover.

[35]Ibid., xii.

Social activist and noted lecturer Tavis Smiley addresses classism within the African community in his book: *The Covenant with Black America.* Smiley attempts motivate the leaders of the African American community to take immediate action in preparing productive future for future generations. Smiley declares: "This C*ovenant with Black America* calls upon all parents, educators, preachers, social service providers, community leaders, and policy-makers to act now and create a brighter future for our children."[36] Smileys' declaration supports the passion of the researcher in her efforts to attribute to the strengthening of the African American community. "It is not a foregone conclusion that America must continue along a path toward greater disparities in wealth, health, and wellbeing. By strengthening neighborhoods and holding our leaders accountable to ensure that all communities are communities of opportunity, we can build cities, regions, and an entire nation where everyone can participate and prosper."[37]

Smiley also gives alarming statistics that reveal the decline of the African American community. These statistics are mostly apparent in the urban communities of the United States. Smiley points out that African American woman are at a major risk because of the massive social disparities of the African American community. On one end of the spectrum women are the strong progressive leaders of the African American community. On the other end of the spectrum Smiley emphasizes, African American women are the greatest victims of American society. For example:

> Nearly seventy percent of black adults between the ages twenty and seventy-four are overweight; more than half of ALL black women are overweight. Black women are close to eighty percent more likely to die of a stroke than white women, and thirty percent more likely to die of a heart attack. Black women are diagnosed

[36]Tavis Smiley, *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 2006), xiv.

[37]Ibid., 103.

> with AIDS at a rate twenty-five times that of white women. More African American women die from asthma than those of any other ethnic group; the mortality rate is more than 2.5 times higher than that of white women. . . . Black women born today are five times more likely to go to prison in their lifetimes than black women born in 1974. One in every eighteen black women born today can expect to go to jail in her lifetime; this is six times the rate for white women.[38]

Smiley boldly points out the problematic areas that plague the socio-economic status of the African American community while also offering solutions for correcting them. His discoveries suggest to the researcher that the social and economic conditions of African American women are imbalanced on the basis of class and of race. In other words, according to Smiley, the life experiences of African American women differ on the basis of class and race.

Womanist theologians and biblical scholars have enlightened the researchers' understanding of the socioeconomic and social relationships among African American women. Womanist theologian Emilie M. Townes addresses the communal aspects of womanist theology in her book *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness.*[39] Townes defines the term "womanist" and gives an explanation of the origins of the term based upon the ideologies of writer Alice Walker who originally coined the phrase in 1982. Townes indicates that Walker's understanding of womanist is communal. The womanist cares about her people—contemporary and historical.[40] The womanist must recognize her location and responsibility in a community.[41] Townes also suggests

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[38]Ibid., 8, 9, 54.

[39]Emile M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

that African American women are the backbone of the African American community and church, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams affirms the life experiences of African American women in her book *Sisters in the Wilderness.*[42] Williams acknowledges the struggles and triumphs of African American women in her efforts to give positive meaning to the wilderness experiences of the African American community. Williams state:

> In the vertical encounter between black women and God in the wilderness experience, transformation of consciousness and epistemological process come together in the new great faith consciousness this meeting bestows upon black women. This faith-consciousness guides black women's way of being and acting in the wide, wide world. Their stories tell of their absolute dependence upon God generated by a faith-consciousness incorporating survival intelligence and visionary capacity. This survival intelligence and vision shape the strategies black women and the black community use to deal with or resist difficult life situations and death-dealing circumstances. Without this female faith-consciousness and its constituent parts basic to the African-American community's wilderness experience, black political history in America would be less rich and less productive.[43]

Although Williams gives validation to the struggles of African American women, she does not validate the opposing forces that are behind their struggles. Williams makes it perfectly clear that the stories of African American women are unique. Their stories are a fertile entity even in the wilderness. The multiple stories of African American women continue to emerge with triumph against all odds. Williams proposes: "Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival

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[42] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Tal* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 159.

[43] Ibid.

and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical disability and caste." [44] More so, womanist theology is inclusive of the stories of all women of color, from all walks of life.

Black philosophical professor and author Angela Y. Davis, addresses the strength of African American women, in accordance with its historical dominance over oppression. Her book, *Women Race and Class*[45] was recognized in the New York Times book review[46] for profoundly addressing the concerns African American women. Davis refers to several noted leaders within the African American community whose stories have emerged as ideal expressions of womanhood in the African American community. Davis writes:

> Black women could hardly strive for weakness; they had to become strong, for their families and their communities needed their strength to survive. Evidence of the accumulated strengths Black women have forged through work, work and more work can be discovered in the contributions of the many outstanding female leaders who have emerged within the Black community. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells and Rosa Parks are not exceptional black women as much as they are epitomes of Black womanhood.[47]

Theologian Renita J. Weems examines the stories of women of the Bible and how their stories speak to the complex lives of women today. Weems addresses this theme in her book *Just a Sister Away.* [48] The title of her book implies that there are benefits to

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[44]Ibid., xiv.

[45]Angela Y. Davis, *Women Race and Class* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1981), back cover.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid., 230.

[48]Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2005), ix.

women sharing their stories with each other. However, Weems emphasizes the strengthening benefits of the contrasting stories among women of varying ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and cultures. Hence, *Just a Sister Away* examines women's relations with one another. What we do know is that one of the best ways to get an idea of how a woman feels about being a woman is to take a look at how she treats other women.[49]

Weems explores the relationships of women in the Bible and the emotions and issues derived from these relationships. Weems states, ". . . despite differences in time, culture, lifestyles, and attitudes, biblical women were compelled by the same passions—love, compassion, hope, jealousy, and fear—that we are. A common thread of sacred female experiences continues to bind centuries of women."[50] Weems suggests further that women of today must pool their resources together in support of one another. She also suggests that continued dialogue and fellowship among women of today is crucial to their understanding themselves and each other. These conversations must take place despite the existence of social barriers. Weems insists that the stories of women, past and present must be heard.

Theologians Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas collaborate in writing an essay that is enclosed in the book: *The Twentieth Century: a Theological Overview*,[51] edited by Gregory Baum. Hopkins and Thomas discuss the historical and present day praxis of liberation theologies that give voice to marginalized persons of color. Their

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Gregory Baum, ed., *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1999), 204.

essay entitled "*Voices from the Margins in the United States*" discusses the historical progression of the voices of the marginalized in America as influenced by Third World countries.

Bishop Vashti McKenzies' book, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry*[52] explores the lives of women who believed God in the midst adversity and the challenges of classism, racism, and sexism. McKenzie examines the lives of women from various generations that challenged the differing social and cultural ills of their time. *Not Without a Struggle* both challenges African American women in ministry to be concerned about the larger African American community.

McKenzie states: "The African American community cannot afford to be divided within the ranks along gender or class distinctions. It must rise to the egalitarian call of Jesus the Christ in seizing the opportunity to follow his nonconformist liberating lifestyle. The distinctions of race, gender, and class are swallowed up by an agape love and reemerge into a new humanity."[53] This literary work greatly supported the researchers' efforts in attempting to strengthen the urban community and the relationships among women within the urban church. McKenzie is a leading African American woman author who dares to tackle controversial issues that plague the African American community. However, her literary focus has been to address the important issues that will uplift and purge African American women.

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[52]Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), ix.

[53]Ibid., 53.

McKenzie suggests that African American clergymen should take the lead in the praxis and implementation of addressing issues of class within the church. This suggestion is to ensure the absence of an aristocratic Gospel. McKenzie states:

> The theological challenges facing African American clergywomen are many. One is to formulate a constructive Christology that includes both women and the larger African American community.
>
> Another challenge is to explore 'what Christ means in a society in which class distinctions are increasing.' A high percentage of African American women are working-class, poor, single mothers, and heads of households. These women are being subjugated within the African American community.
>
> If Womanist theology is unable to meet this challenge of classism, then it will be viewed, indicates Grant, as another bourgeois theology, concerning itself only with issues pertinent to the middle class and excluding the majority of African American women.[54]

Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant is the author of *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*. Her book addresses the different perspectives in which African American women and White women approach theology. Grant suggests that African American women take into consideration racism, classism, and sexism as they develop their Christology and womanist theology.[55] Grant supports the idea that women of differing socio-economic classes, ethnicities, and cultures should come together for the common good of society and self empowerment. However, she concludes that there must exist mutual understanding and acceptance for true reconciliation to take place. Grant elaborates:

> From a Black woman's vantage point then, the language of partnership is merely a rewording of the language of 'reconciliation,' which proves to be empty rhetoric unless it is

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[54]Ibid., 54.

[55]Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), x.

> preceded by liberation. . . . Partnership/reconciliation implies three things: (1) a basis for bonding, (2) a relationship of trust, and (3) more commonalities than differences. [56]

In review of these and other authors who have embraced the subject of classism and its effect upon the African American community, past, future, and present, the researcher realizes that her literary journey has not yet ended. There is much more for her to learn as she ventures forth in her journey as an African American woman. The researcher seeks to continue to engage innovative and profound literary works that will benefit the productivity of the urban church in the public square.

Chapter three will provide the biblical, theological, theoretical, and historical basis for our understanding and analysis of the researcher's doctor of ministry project. The reader will further present additional literary resources that strongly support relative aspects of her project. The next chapter will give an overview of the theoretical foundation of the project.

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[56]Ibid., 191.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Classism within the African American Community

As we explore the theoretical foundations of classism within the African American community, it is inevitable to note that we are engaging a taboo subject in the African American community. Nationally known author, attorney, and commentator on race and politics in America, Lawrence Otis Graham spent six years in exploration of America's black upper-class. Graham dared to uncover the hidden truths of Black society in the publication of his national best selling book *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class.*[1] Graham states:

> For many people, this book is a political or social hot potato in the sense that even though most blacks talk about the issues of elitism, racial passing, class structure, and skin color within the black community, they don't want to see it broadcast in a book. For a few black members of the media, the topic struck too close to their own past experiences of being excluded by snobbish members of the black elite. Some of them quietly told me that they were glad that I wrote the book because it was disproving the stereotypes, but that they could not publicly support the book because their white audiences would find the concept of rich, educated blacks too threatening and because their black audiences would find the subject too painful. . . . You opened a whole can of worms, another remarked as she stood by listening.[2]

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[1]Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2000).

[2]Ibid., ix, x.

The subject of classism is not only taboo within the scope of the African-American community at-large; it is also taboo within the dialogue of the African-American church. In response, Reverend Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, author of *Urban Souls*[3] suggests: "We are silent when it comes to issues of class, gender, and undemocratic leadership in the Black Church."[4] However, within the African American community issues pertaining to classism as a whole have historically been influenced by color, a phenomenon within the African American community that reveals tensions of prejudice between African Americans.

Author Susanna Walker in her book *Style and Status*[5] reveals this hidden aspect of African American culture. Walker states: "The narrow range of 'types of racial beauty' represented in African American beauty culture advertising and other popular media during the 1920s and 1930s reveals tensions over class and color in black society."[6] Historians who have written on the subject observe that color has an emotional and divisive issue in black communities since slavery but that it became particularly prominent after emancipation.[7] Walker further denotes:

> The offspring of black women slaves and their white owners were widely believed to receive favorable treatment. Mulattos were more likely to gain their freedom, and they made up a disproportionate number of free black people before the Civil War. In the latter half of the nineteenth century African Americans perpetuated certain economic advantages for mulattos.

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[3]Osagyefo Uhuru Sekeo, *Urban Souls* (Saint Louis, MO: Urban Press, 2001).

[4]Ibid., 51.

[5]Susanna Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women 1920-1975* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky), 2007.

[6]Ibid., 82.

[7]Ibid., 83.

> Furthermore, as historian Willard B. Gatewood points out, mulatto elites of urban black society sought to use color as a device to exclude new, working-class migrants to the cities. Although color was by no means the only factor for determining African American social status, it was always part of the equation.[8]

In analyzing the spiritual autobiography of the researcher, the researcher recalls her own personal experience in how color and class interrelated and infiltrated the culture of the African American church. The researcher draws this parallel analysis from her childhood experience in the African American church. At Christmas time this phenomenon was gravely apparent in the selection of what children would portray Mary and Joseph in the annual children's Christmas pageant. This selection was not based upon economic status but skin color, which is a form of classism as well.

The selections for these roles were made by the Sunday school teachers and/or the pastor would always select the lightest skinned little girl who had the longest hair to portray Mary, the mother of Jesus. The lightest skinned boy was always selected to portray Joseph. No one would dare challenge the selections. It was simply accepted as the norm in African American religious culture. Even now, at Easter time a dark skinned man is hardly ever or mostly never chosen to portray Jesus in African American churches.

As classism is apparent in the African American community it is very much so in the African American church as well. However, God is raising up a variation of leaders: scholars, theologians, rap artist, domestic workers and youth that are being equipped to slay the Goliath giant of classism. However, this must be a combined unified effort in order to be largely effective as to purify the African American church community and ultimately the entire body of Jesus Christ.

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[8]Ibid.

In a 1998, theologian and scholar Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was interviewed by Frontline producer June Cross which aired on the Public Broadcasting System. The interview was entitled "the Two Nations of Black America," where Gates addresses how classism has affected the African American community. Gates states the following:

> How did we end up with the largest middle class in history and the largest underclass in history 30 years after Martin Luther King was killed? America, the central paradox confronting our generation of African Americans is this: we have simultaneously and paradoxically the largest black middle class in history and the largest black underclass in history?
>
> 45% of all black children live at or beneath the poverty line. Nobody predicted this in 1968. We thought that if we could move into the middle class to such a great extent as we had then everybody would be in the middle class. Thurgood Marshall told his associates the day of Brown v. Board, it's all over now, boys, [in] five years we won't even need the NAACP, we won't even need advocacy groups, we will all be members of the American mainstream. And as we know all too painfully that didn't take place. [9]

Gates points out some disturbing statistics that raises concerns for all African Americans. African Americans have progressed over the last thirty years. At the same time Gates suggests that African Americans have simultaneously digressed. What is alarming to the researcher is African Americans have lost the cohesiveness and spirit of unity that they possessed and demonstrated prior to integration. However, Gates addresses the issue of classism within the African community as to provoke a change while targeting the mindsets of the middle class.

> First of all, it was naïve to assume that tens of millions of black people would all be in the same class. You see, we were all in the same class before the law under segregation. If you have a law that says all blacks shall or blacks shan't then you're all in the same class whether you're a janitor or doctor, whether you're a brain surgeon or a hairdresser. But once that law is lifted then the

[9]Gates, Jr., *Frontline,* "The Nations of Black America", http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages /frontline/shows/race/(accessed November 19, 2007).

> class distinctions which had always obtained within the African-American community, as every black person knows, came to the fore.
>
> In fact they became infinitely more complex because instead of having what my mother used to call colored money, now if you were in upper middle class you could, after affirmative action, have access to white money. Meaning you didn't live in Sugar Hill in Harlem, in the upper class section any more, you could eventually move to Scarsdale or Greenwich or Stanford or some other upper middle class white suburban town. And as William Julius Wilson has pointed out, that had enormous implications for the African American community. All the middle class role models took a hike.
>
> The people living in inner cities don't want to live in inner cities necessarily. They want to live in nice communities where they feel safe. A lot of people love black culture and they like the cultural space that let's say Harlem was, or Bedford-Stuyvesant was, but if they have to choose between the legacy of our culture and rats and roaches and drug heads and the homeless, well what are they going to do? Where are you going to raise your children? They want to move. So they move when they could.[10]

The effects of classism within the African American community are greatly evident in the ministry of black urban churches in transition where you have a middle class congregation that is located in an urban impoverished community. However, a large number of the middle class congregants have moved out of the inner city from where they grew up, and now drive in from the suburbs to attend church in the inner-city. However, they are disconnected from the problems and crisis of the inner-city and those persons living there. Therefore, the issues of class within the African American community infiltrate and become directly related to the function of ministry of the Black church.

Based on the researcher's observations, many of the issues of class pertaining to the social relationships within an urban ministry in transition often go ignored. The

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[10]Ibid.

researcher has made this observation in both Caucasian and African American congregations. Authors of sociology Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins suggests social class shapes relationships.[11] Those congregations that are physically located in urban communities where the congregation is predominately middleclass, must do a self- examination. They must examine the disconnect that speaks to their response or lack of response to the urban conditions that really effect all Americans regardless of race or class.

However, there is a distinct concern of crisis pertaining to the African American community. Gates addresses our moral response in answering Cross's question: "Does Skip Gates get up in the morning, look in the mirror and think about the 45% on a regular basis?" Gates states the following:

> I'm sure that there are some African Americans who wake up every day and think about the socioeconomic evils affecting our community, when they first look in the mirror, but I'm not one of them. Generally, when I look in the mirror I think, thank God that I made it through the night and I think about what I have to do in the course of the day.
>
> But, some part of my consciousness in the course of my day certainly is occupied by, and I think is true for all Black Americans, one central question: What does it mean to be Black in a society where being Black has so many negative implications at the end of the great American century?

What Gates is attempting to unveil is: until all African Americans have overcome the oppressive forces of classism and her twin, racism, none of them have truly overcome:

> And that means that no matter how successful a Harvard professor is, or any of us in any aspect of American life, you are never too far removed from a Black person in the most impoverished inner-city neighborhood in your community. The

[11]Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology Second Edition* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), 66.

> system would be better off, you might say, if that weren't true. Why should the people be so concerned with the plight of the unsuccessful people? But that's the way it is, and as long as the system continues in the form in which it has manifested itself that situation will remain.
>
> Frankly, from a moral point of view, I'll take whatever cause keeps connecting the middle class with the lower class. But it so happens that I deep down believe that many people would escape, completely, if they could, that there is nothing natural about feeling compassion toward those people who look like you, but who have not been as successful as you.
>
> That's one of the things that Cornell West was so brilliant about, recreating in people their sense of moral responsibility for each other: black upper-class and middle-class people for black underclass people. White people for Black people. Black people for Jewish people. Males for females. Straight people for gay people. That is how you create a community.
>
> Well, certainly one of the ironies of the success of affirmative action is that the middle class within the black community no longer lives within "black community" by and large. And, this Bill Wilson's thesis, that the black successful individuals, professionals, have moved out of that community. So that the kind of role models that we all had when we were growing, when under segregation, the lawyer, the undertaker, the teacher, the doctor, lived not too far away. Sometimes, next door to the janitor, the hairdresser, the secretary, the street sweeper, the garbage person. So, we had this complicated set of role models and images swirl all around us.[12]

The exodus of the Black middle class from the Black community was initially intended to be a step in the progression of African Americans. This exodus was to be a positive move for the whole of the Black community. After the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the playing field for Blacks of all socio-economic classes was viewed as being equal. However, some would say that there were some who were left behind. Others would say that there were those who just did not keep up. Therefore, Gates must raise the question: Who is to blame? Ironically, the Black middleclass exodus has back

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[12]Gates, *Frontline*, "*The Two Nations of Black America.*"

lashed into becoming a catalyst for the neglect of the Black community. Gates states further:

> Also, there was a sense of concern and feeling, out of necessity for each other, so that if you were being bad some adult would say, "What's your name? I'm going to tell your daddy. I know your daddy, and he's going to beat your butt if I don't catch you first." All that's gone so that the Black people who were doing well, by and large, moved to the middleclass neighborhoods. And then the presence of crack/cocaine, as many people have pointed out, drastically changed the desperation factor in the African American community. That, and the fact that the traditional pattern of moving from no class through working class, from working class to middle class, that is, through factories located in the cities, that, by and large, has disappeared. Those jobs have gone, have headed south.
>
> So that if you add all those factors up, you had a politically disenfranchised, economically disenfranchised group of people left in the inner city, predominately black. Black people doing well, able to take advantage of affirmative action, living in middle class neighborhoods and never the twain shall meet . . . [13]

The core of the issues that Gates is addressing is the existing disconnect between the middle class and the underclass of the African American community. Many middle class African Americans continue to attend church in the urban community. They continue to attend these churches because they grew up in these once middle class neighborhoods. Now that the neighborhood has changed, middle class church commuters have no real allegiance to the urban community. This is a sad reality in the ministry of the urban churches with middle class commuting congregations. What results is the cutting off of their blood supply. Gates suggests that by the middle class neglecting the plight of the urban class, they are really neglecting themselves. In other words they are neglecting the future of Black America. Gates further suggests:

> How can you be, let's say, a professor at Princeton and think that the forms of discrimination that you suffer are exactly the

[13]Ibid.

> same as a household in the inner city with a 16 year old mother, and a 32 year old grandmother, and a 48 year old great-grandmother?
>
> And, of course, I exaggerate. But there are households that exist that conform to that image. Just like there are households like the Huxtable's, with the black lawyer and a black doctor married to each other, and their kids going to wherever they want to go to school. But, again, no one predicted the three generation, maternal household on the one hand, and Cliff and Claire Huxtable on the other, existing simultaneously. And then calling these two representatives of the black community, a family, a unit, a people. Where does being a people start and stop?[14]

Being a people starts with a relationship one with another across lines of socio-economic class whereby we emphasize our commonalities as opposed to our differences and are not emotionally removed from the plight of the disadvantaged. Being a people stops when this does not take place. Regardless of one's socio-economic class within the African American community, we all have a connection that we can not deny whether we try to or not. Our relationship across lines of class will affect us all as a people in the long run. However, many of the African Americans of middle and upper class status have neglected to take interest or moral responsibility in addressing the concerns of a lower economic status. Dr. Julianne Malveaux, President, Bennett College for Women declares:

> The greatest threat to African Americans is economic injustice. We see the disproportionate amount of poverty and unemployment in our community the way predatory lending has imperiled so many African-American home owners, and the whole issue of inadequate access to higher education. It is an issue that Dr. King highlighted very early on, but what is amazing to me is how, as more African-American people move into the "middle class," we seem to be unwilling to address the issues.[15]
>
> This suggests that the hearts of the middle class have grown callous in their response to the socio-economically under-privileged. When we get down to the core of the matter we are

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Julianne Malveaux, "*The Greatest Challenges to African Americans in 2008,*" Essence Magazine, December 2007, 168. (New York, NY: Time, Inc.).

> dealing with issues of the heart, whereby those of the African-American middle and upper class have strayed away from their first love of loving God as they love their neighbor beyond geographical locations, which extends to our sisters and brothers of every class, gender, and creed.

Dr. W. Franklyn Richardson suggests that that as African-Americans we all have common concerns that effect us all as he poses the question, "Who's going to direct the choir?"[16] Richardson states further: Our fundamental message of healing and hope for African-Americans is as significant as ever, but we need to connect it to the issues that most affect our community now and will affect us in the future.[17] A response to Dr. Richardson's question is that the choir represents the whole of the African American community and the director of the choir will be a rotating and mentoring responsibility whereby it becomes a shared responsibility among those who are capable and willing to be leaders for the whole of the African American community.

These leaders or, figuratively speaking, choir directors, are equipped to train up and empower those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. We must realize that there exist directors of the choir among the hidden resources that lay within many a neglected impoverished community as diamonds in the rough.

Ironically however, it is usually more likely that a person farthest down will advocate complete justice for all than that of the person farthest up the ladder will.[18] It is hardly possible for the most privileged to be as sensitive to the injustices, the restrictions and the limitations imposed upon the weak as it is for the weak themselves.[19] Michael

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[16]Sekeo, *Urban Souls*, 45.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Milton C. Sernett, *Afro-American Religious History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 346.

Eric Dyson speaks to this phenomenon whereby the Black middle class have become disconnected in empathizing with the plight of African-Americans of lower income in his book *Is Bill Cosby Right: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* Dyson addresses a speech made by Bill Cosby on May 17, 2004 at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.[20] The famed entertainer was to receive an award for his philanthropic endeavors during a gala event commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, sponsored by NAACP, the NAACP legal Fund, and Howard University.[21] Dyson goes on to say:

> When Cosby opened his mouth, instead of lauding the efforts of civil rights pioneers, he bitterly scorned poor blacks for "not holding up their end in this deal." The Washington Post, which broke the story, reports that Cosby lamented that activists "marched and were hit with rocks . . . to get an education, and now we've got these knuckleheads walking around," referring to the "lower economic people" of the race. Cosby accused them of not parenting," and said that they "cry when their son is standing there in an orange suit"—meaning those in jail and prison—while failing to prevent their children's criminal behavior. "Where were you when he was two? Where were you when he was twelve? Where were you when he was eighteen and how come you didn't know that he had a pistol? And where is his father?"
>
> Cosby also attacked black youth who "put their clothes on backward: Isn't that a sign of something gone wrong?" [22]

Cosby's outspokenness is definitely a sign of long standing personal frustrations that have moved him to verbally explode upon the masses of African-Americans who are impoverished. What is ironic is that Cosby grew up poor. There are those who defend Cosby suggesting that he has a right to verbally explode on the poor since he was once

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[20]Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), xi.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., 178.

poor himself. Dyson makes a clear distinction as to how "Cosby was a poor child, not a poor parent."[23] Even though there are numerous liabilities of being poor as a child, one of them isn't shouldering moral responsibility and social stigma for one's plight, a regular occurrence for poor parents.[24] However the comments made by Cosby do not sound like the old Cosby the researcher heard several decades ago. That Cosby was seemingly a more compassionate Cosby that could identify more with the poor. The researcher is speaking of the "Uptown Saturday Night" Bill Cosby and the "Let's Do it Again" Bill Cosby many of us used to know.[25] In an interview Cosby candidly reflects on what is was like for him to be poor:

> I think whites should begin to understand how personally destructive poverty is. Drive through Harlem sometime; if a cat's got no bread, he's just not going to look good. He'll look bad enough not having a job and having no money coming in; but if he comes out of a one-room apartment with three or four brothers, and his father has no job, how can he possibly look good? And when you're poor, nobody wants to have anything to do with you....The point is: The poorer you are, the uglier you are. And that poverty creeps into every part of black people's lives: poor education, poor housing, poor sanitation, poor medical care and, as a result of all these, poor jobs . . .

Dyson suggests that this is the Cosby we need to revive: a critical, clear compassionate analyst, perhaps even an informal ethnographer, of the lives of the poor.[26] Dyson goes on further to suggest:

> We need not pity the poor, nor should we deny the huge problems along the parents of the black poor, but we should never lose sight

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[23]Ibid., 179.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Uptown Saturday Night and Let's Do it Again were African-American movies that were filmed in the early 1970's that depicted inner-city life where Cosby portrays a struggling working class man. Both films were directed by Sidney Poitier.

[26]Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right,* 180.

> of the colossal barriers they face just to get up in the morning, just to put one foot in front of the next, just to make ends meet. What we need more of is the relentless effort to help lift the poor from their condition even as we enable them to respect themselves and support their families. As Cosby's family troubles prove, one need not be poor to experience failure or setback, and as the lives of so many poor folk suggest, you need not be wealthy to act decently in society and to love, and be loved, at home.[27]

Considering the personal family dilemmas of Bill Cosby, one would think that Cosby would be more apt to reach out a helping hand as opposed to pointing a critical finger to those less fortunate. However, Bill Cosby does suggest: "African Americans must never give up the struggle to eliminate the racism and classism in our society that continue to present obstacles to success for the poor."[28] Relative to Cosby's lack of empathy, compassion, and sense of responsibility in helping the poor Dyson suggests Cosby has forgotten a crucial concept Jesus advocated, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much is required."[29] W.E.B. Du Bois grants such empathetic voice as a spokesman of the Black Bourgeoisie in response to the plight of the poor at the turn of the twentieth century:

> Above all, the better classes of the Negroes should recognize their duty toward the masses. They should not forget that the spirit of the twentieth century is to be the turning of the high toward the lowly, the bending of Humanity to all that is human; the recognition that in the slums of modern society lie the answers to most of our puzzling problems of organization and life, and that only as we solve those problems is our culture assured and our progress certain…So hard has been the rise of the better class of Negroes fear to fall if now they stoop to lend a hand to their fellow. . . . This is especially true, but they do not yet do nearly as much as they must, nor do they clearly recognize their responsibility. Finally, the Negroes must cultivate a spirit of calm,

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[27]Ibid.

[28]William H. Cosby, Jr. and Alvin F. Poussant, M.D., *Come On People: On the Path From Victims To Victors* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), xviii.

[29]Ibid., 236.

> patient persistence in their attitude toward their fellow citizens rather than of loud and intemperate complaint. A man may be wrong, and knows he is wrong, and yet some finesses must be used in telling him of it. . . . [I]t will not improve matters to call names or impute unworthy motives to all men. Social reforms move slowly and yet when Right is reinforced but calm but persistent Progress we somehow all feel that in the end it must triumph.[30]

Dr. Marvin McMickle addresses the widening disconnect between inner-city and middleclass African Americans by examining ways to lessen this existing cleavage in his book *Preaching to the Black Middle Class : Words of Challenge, Words of Hope, Dr.* McMickle explores the ministry obligations and challenges of black middle class churches that are physically located within America's inner cities.

Dr. McMickle suggests that increasingly, these churches have two separate congregations.[31] One church is the membership that drives into the inner city each Sunday for worship and fellowship.[32] The other church is the people who live in the neighborhood that surrounds the church building, who turn to the church in search of hot meals, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) support groups, day-care services, and even temporary shelter.[33] In many instances, the first church is composed of people in the middle class, and the second church is composed of people in the underclass.[34] Thus the researcher asks, along with Dr. McMickle, the question must be addressed: How should one relate to the other?

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[30]Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right, 236*, 237.

[31]Marvin McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middleclass: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), xi.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid

In conclusion, if the urban church is going to survive it is imperative that it overcomes social barriers—racial, economic, linguistic, cultural, sexual, and age—in order to meet challenges.[35] In *Urban Ministry* David Claerbaut further suggests:

> To do this reconciling, the church must go to people where they are. Howard Rice stresses this by saying that if we really believe God dwells with people, and then we have to go the cities where most of them are. For the church in the city this means locating in and among the poor. All too often, however, middle-class Christians move out as the poor move into a community. Then, several years, those same Christians go back to try to evangelize the present inhabitants. It is no wonder that the poor have little respect when those doing missionary work did not want to live with in the first place. When the church does demonstrate genuine social commitment, however, its spiritual message gains credibility . . . Rene' Bideaux says that a missional church may have to break out of its own tight fellowship to embrace the poor and dispossessed who are just outside the door, to reach out heal the individual and social hurts in community.[36]

In due time, many churches will begin to realize that if they do not interact with their geographical community in some way, they are going to die.[37] If the church is to live, it will have to find some way of reaching out to its neighborhood.[38] So the church begins to become concerned about its city and its neighborhood.[39] This of course, is a much more holistic approach because of the recognition that the church must be present to the people around it and must be concerned both with evangelism and social action.[40] It is inadequate to be concerned with the souls of the people around the church—

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[35]David Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 25.

[36]Ibid., 25, 26.

[37]Robert C. Linthicum, *Empowering the Poor* (Monrovia CA: MARC Publishing, 1991), 22.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

particularly if those people are poor—unless the church is also going to be concerned about the social and economic needs of the people…That church becomes flesh of the peoples' flesh and bone of the peoples' bone.[41]

Culture

Culture is the anthropologist's label for the sum of the distinctive characteristics of a people's way of life. [42]It is the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behavior.[43]All behavior occurs within particular cultures, with in socially defined contexts. Sociologist Jeff Lewis defines culture in the following manner:

> Cultures are formed around the meanings people construct and share. Contemporary First World cultures, in particular, are formed through televisual media experiences and other everyday practices (activities). These 'mediation' processes can be understood as the interaction between the text, the text producers and the text audiences. This relationship operates within an encompassing and dynamic cultural context. Culture, therefore, is both the context of existing meanings and the dynamic which stimulates the production and dissemination of new meanings. Culture, in fact, is best understood as the processes of meaning-making within a given social group. Culture may be formed and operated through a broad range of social groupings and social practices: for example, family, neighborhood, age-group, and ethnic group, religion, workplace, text style, clothing style, nation, globe, and so on.[44]

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[41]Ibid., 22, 23.

[42]Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 17.

[43]Richard T. Schaefer, *Schaefer, Sociology 11th Edition* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2008), 58.

[44]Jeff Lewis, *Cultural Studies: The Basics* (London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd., 2002), 3.

Culture is a main theme in doing urban ministry in the understanding and awareness of relative culture of urban communities. Knowledge and awareness of the culture of the urban context largely impacts the productivity of doing urban ministry. Every environment and people adheres to a particular culture as a way of life. In understanding others one must understand their cultural context. Urban communities consist of multi-ethnic and multi-socio-economic groups that portray a variation of cultural and sub-cultural characteristics. These characteristics influence social interactions, food, music, clothing styles, housing standards, economic values and standards, educational conditions, etc.

Elements of Social Structure and Culture

In conducting the research analysis of culture relative to classism in the African-American church and in the community, attention must also be given to the elements of social structure and culture and their relationship to the productivity of an urban church in transition in that "they play a central role in the creation, maintenance, and social response to various social problems."[45] When looking at the sociological structure of the African American community we must be conscious of the structure of its society which refers to the how it is organized. A society is organized into different parts: institutions, social groups, statuses, and roles as defined below:[46]

- An institution is an established and enduring pattern of social relationships.[47] There are five institutions that are traditionally referenced: family, religion, politics, education, and economics.

[45]David Knox, Linda A. Mooney, and Caroline Schacht, *Understanding Social Problems* (Belmont, CA: McGraw Hill, 2008), 8.

[46]Ibid., 4.

[47]Ibid.

- Social Groups are what institutions are made of. A social group is defined as two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship.[48]

- Statuses are positions that a person occupies within a social group.[49] In the same manner that social institutions consist of social groups, likewise social groups consist of statuses. The statuses we occupy largely define our social identity.50 Statuses can either be ascribed or achieved.[51] An ascribed status is one that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control.[52] However, an achieved status is assigned on the basis of some characteristic or behavior over which the individual has some control.[53]

- Every status is connected to several roles, which include rights, obligations, and expectations are associated with status in that roles guide our behavior and allow us to predict the behavior of others.[54]

Elements of Culture

Whereas social structure refers to the organization of society, culture refers to meanings and ways of life that characterize a society.[55] The elements of culture include beliefs, values, norms, sanctions, and symbols as listed below:[56]

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[48]Knox, *Understanding Social Problems,* 4.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid.

- Beliefs refer to definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true.[57] The beliefs of an individual or particular group have bearing on how the individual or group perceives a particular social condition to be considered as a social problem.

- Values are social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable.[58] Values greatly attribute to the interpretation of a condition as a social problem as well as the development of the social condition.

- Norms and sanctions are basically socially defined rules of behavior that under the norm serve as guidelines for our behavior and for what we expect from the behavior of others as well. All norms are tied to sanctions that govern the consequences of conforming to or violating norms.

Urban Ministry

The term "Urban" is more an aesthetic word. Urban is becoming more of a culture rather than a geographical location.[59] As the conditions of the cities and the cultures and sub-cultures of society have evolved, so has the definition of urban evolved. This new definition of urban has influenced the changes that have occurred and are yet occurring in doing ministry in the urban context. Therefore evidence is ever emerging that Urban Ministry is ever evolving. Urban Ministry entails the multi-faceted cultural and social concerns that pertain not only to the socio-economic changes, but to the persons of varied classes, cultures, and ethnicities within the surrounding urban community.

A Redefinition of Urban

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Soja 2000: *"Post Metropolis Critical Studies of Cities Religions* from the power point presentation given by Dr. Dan Hodge at the January 2008 doctoral intensive at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

A redefinition of urban draws further on an analysis of the term urban by defining it in fusion with black popular culture and the context of the city. Sociologist Stuart Hall speaks of three elements in the repertoires of Urban Black Popular Culture: style, music, use of body as canvas, and the city being hip.[60] All of these cultural aspects have a very distinct meaning, purpose, and value to the urban context. The urban context is, relative to black popular culture and the influence, development and nature of urban ministry. As Black popular culture evolves, so does and must ministry within an urban church in transition. The ministries of the urban church in transition must evolve if they are going to continue to survive in the urban context.

Sociologist David Claerbaut defines Urban Ministry as encompassing the urban church and ministry.[61] He states further that a good working definition is "a community, usually organized formally, of God's people in the city."[62] Ministry is carried on, but with the members and without to the world.[63] Carrying ministry out into the surrounding community of the urban church where the members are middle class is often a challenge. The middle class members of urban churches are more apt to write a check towards ministry overseas than for their own urban community. They are also more willing to do

[60]Gina Dent, *Black Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1983), 158.

[61]Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry, 13.*

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid.

urban ministry if it is short term or not too personally or emotionally involved. According to Claerbaut Urban Ministry is a broad topic that has six facets:

> (1) worship—adoration to God;
>
> (2) evangelism—reaching those on the outside with the gospel;
>
> (3) discipleship—developing mature followers of Christ;
>
> (4) fellowship—care and intimacy among the members;
>
> (5) stewardship—responsible earthly citizenship aimed at advancing justice and improving the quality of life in the neighborhood, city, and world;
>
> (6) service—addressing immediate physical, social needs of those within and without.[64]

Fellowship: Southern Hospitality and Soul Food

Oftentimes people from different cultural, ethnic and economic backgrounds would love to have fellowship with one another beyond the surface. People desire fellowship beyond the surface, where we are simply relating to each other on a shallow or *minimal* level. This is in reference to relationships where we work together but do not really know each other. We worship together, but we do not know each other on a personal basis. Relational gaps exist in our social, inter-personal relationships within the body of Christ on the basis of cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic differences. Of course there are other differences as well that could come under the umbrella of those mentioned. These relational gaps exist for many reasons including fear and intimidation. Most local communities, ethnic or

[64]Claerbaut, *Urban* Ministry, 61.

otherwise, are afraid of change.[65] Whether religious, political, or economic, change of any sort threatens most individuals.[66] Communities, like individuals, resist the unknown.[67]

Through the methodology of small group fellowship, the researcher proposes to create an opportunity for small group fellowship among women of the church that would love for their inter-personal relationships to be enhanced. In doing so, they will begin the process of getting to know each other beyond the mentioned surface levels of communication through the sharing of their stories, gifts and graces, and life experiences. This kind of sharing is most effective in a fun, loving, trusting, flexible, and relaxed environment. This type of atmosphere is conducive for breaking down the barriers of fear, intimidation, and exclusiveness.

The atmosphere for this type of gathering is not automatic in its occurrence, it must be intentionally and creatively activated and carried out by procedures of mediation, cultivation and initiation by leadership whether it be lay or clergy. However, this type of endeavor must have the full support of the clergy, church board, staff, and laity in order to be effective. This type of fellowship is designed with the intensions of:

- creating an atmosphere for the development of new inter-personal relationships
- the development of greater self-esteem; appreciation for the gifts and cultures of others; a deeper sense of self

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

- a deeper understanding of our relationship with God and with each other

The researcher has discovered that people from diverse cultures want to fellowship but sometimes they do not know how. The researcher has even encountered clergy persons that have struggled with knowing what to do, in order to effectively bridge relationships between differing socio-economic groups of people, within urban ministries in transition.

In the researcher's former ministry context one of the greatest opportunities for fellowship with persons from all walks of life was on Sunday morning where the members greeted one another. This was inclusive of all visitors, where members and visitors from all walk of life fellowshipped together one-on-one with coffee and delicious pastries. There they laughed and talked with each other; sharing stories and embracing one another in Christian love.

> Coffee hour does not force any political point of view on any one; thus in a time of radicalization of the pulpit, the social hall has become the sanctuary of the church. Radicals and Reaganites can carry on about anything from Kierkegaard to croquet as they sip coffee after church.[68]

The Greek word for fellowship is "Koinonia," meaning a communion of persons on equal terms, or a "sharing" of experience and of possessions as in II Corinthians 8:4[69] which says, "They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."[70] Fellowship creates the environment for

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[68]Rebecca Davis and Susan Mesner, ed., *The Treasury of Religious & Spiritual Quotations: Words to Live By* (New York, NY: Readers Digest, 1994), 187.

[69]Madeline S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1961), 191.

[70]Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are derived from Lyman Coleman, Richard Peace and Brenda Quinn, ed. *Serendipity Bible.*

personal relationship. At the heart of dismantling classism, racism, culturalism and sexism is the commitment to building relationships of equality across cultural and ethnic lines.[71] Shearer goes on to say:

> Educational institutions, the workplace, and community groups also offer opportunities for entering into new cross-cultural relationships–but given housing patterns and social circles, those relationships rarely drop into our laps. We must create opportunities for developing relationships by seeking out places where different ethnic groups come together, then moving outside of our safety zones to get to know new people…
>
> As I remember that celebration and the many friendships across cultural lines that I've been privileged to develop, I'm reminded of a suggestion Tom Skinner makes. He says, "It's in hanging out that I start unveiling the deep things in my life that I don't normally talk about. It's in hanging out that people get to know me and I get to know them. And it's in hanging out that I know where the other person is coming from. I learn their history and what they think."[72]

Storytelling

Storytelling is the wonder-working power that has always been part of the unfolding journey of humankind.[73]

> Stories are preserved because they reveal what is most valued and sacred to a community. Stories are a source of the life force itself. When any community ceases to proclaim its unique and peculiar story, it dies. Its voice is silenced. And where a living fellowship once was, only ghost stories hover in the air-waiting to be remembered and brought to speech again. Stories are powerful.[74]

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[71]Jody Miller Shearer, *Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege Toward Racial Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, AZ: Herald Press, 1994), 156.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Helen Bruch Pearson, *Do What You Have the Power to Do: Studies of Six New Testament Women* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1992), 14.

[74]Ibid.

New Testament scholar Thomas E. Boomershine gives us an invitation to embark upon a story journey whereby he says: "The best way to get people involved in telling stories is to lead a group through the stages of learning and telling a story."[75] Learning a story with a group is great fun. And the best introduction to learning a biblical story is for people to get physically and emotionally involved as a group in some kind of fun.[76] Boomershine is a former urban pastor who struggled for years in trying to bridge differing socio-economic relationships within an urban church in transition. Boomershine affirmed the usage of story telling as a productive tool in efforts to enhance differing socioeconomic relationships.

Southern Hospitality and Soul Food

Southern hospitality is a vitally important term coined after the traditions of extended hospitality and fellowship as practiced in the southern United States. The aspects of southern hospitality reflect various cultural traits that have been passed down from generation to generation. These aspects characterize good manners, entertainment, certain social graces, culinary expertise, and traditions.

However, Southern hospitality can be experienced outside of the southern parts of the country due to the Diasporas that have occurred following the Ante-bellum Period of the Deep South. Many Southerners now live all over the world and have taken their southern hospitality with them as they continue the practice of their embedded traditions.

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[75]Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), 54.

[76]Ibid.

At the core of southern hospitality is the serving of food. Food is most often given as a show of "southern hospitality" to visiting guests and particularly new acquaintances.[77] To the southerner "cooking for others is a gracious thing to do—a giving of yourself."[78] As typical of southern hospitality, many women in the interviews done by author Mary Douglas recall their mothers following such an ethic, often extending hospitality to the poor.[79]

The notion of Southern hospitality is that if you had or did not have, you shared what you had, regardless of plenty or lack. Douglas refers to a Georgia woman's interview: "I love offering hospitality; it's almost a gift that I am giving."[80] She further states: "Everyone who came to our house was made to feel at home—welcomed by extending something to drink." In many cases, a full course homemade meal from scratch or a slice of homemade cake or pie would be offered to a guest. This kind of sharing food is a spiritual experience.[81] The spiritual experience of sharing food is the essence of the African-American tradition of Soul Food, in that it originated under the extreme conditions of "making do with what you have."[82] This is culinary faith. Douglas reveals in her research:

> For poor women, however, as sociologist Marjorie De Vault points out, making do, sometimes with extremely limited resources,

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[77]Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festival in Three American Communities* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 107.

[78]Ibid., 133.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Douglas, *Food in the Social Order*, 134.

[81]Ibid.

[82]An old phrase that is commonly used in the African-American community. The phrase implies making use of what little you possess in order to sustain an individual or group.

> remains a necessity. Marvelene Hughes explains how African American women manage and even triumph in scarcity:'...economics can not control her soulful creativity in the preparation of foods. Consider some of the classic foods that are labeled soul food: pigs' feet, ham hocks, chitterlings, pigs' ear hog jowl, tripe, cracklings, chicken backs, giblets, chicken wings, and oxtails. All those were initially leftovers or throw-always' given to Blacks (slaves) who wanted to believe they were in the land of plenty....The survival-oriented Black woman trusts her creative skills to 'make something out of nothing.' 'African American women have often excelled using their creativity in the kitchen. Indeed, in cooking, 'Everything is creating,' according to celebrated African American chef Edna Lewis. As noted earlier, the message of making do with what one has relates closely to conserving. But using one's wits to manage what *is* as basis for a new creation develops an added dimension.[83]

However, Sunday dinner is a widespread Southern tradition consisting of extra portions of food, especially prepared recipes requiring more extensive food preparation. Formalities such as saying the grace; eating at the dining room table; using your best quality tablecloth, napkins, and eating utensils and glasses traditionally expected. The presence of special guests usually influences whether special utensils or items such as candles or wine are part of the food event.[84] Wine and candles at meals seem to be highly influenced by socioeconomic status.[85] Income influences whether or not one has special utensils or not.[86] Those persons of lower income may possess special utensils etc. that have been passed down through inheritance. However, in the authentic serving of a soul

[83]Douglas, *Food in the Social Order,* 132.

[84]Ibid., 130.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

food dinner the most common utensils are permissibly acceptable to be used, such as a Mason canning jar for serving sweet tea or freshly squeezed lemonade.[87]

Another component of the social atmosphere of the food event is conversation.[88] In keeping with the southern tradition: "the secret to experiencing great conversation around the dinner table is great food."[89] (No matter how beautiful the table is set; the quality of how good the food tastes, looks, and smells is the determining factor for a great soul food dining experience. At the core, soul food is based on the experience and the six senses of the cook: touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell, and "Soulful intuition."[90] However, the initial indicator of the quality of soul food is noted in the following crucial piece of advice: The aroma of "soul food can fill the house and let the neighbors know that a big pot is cooking....In search for the *best* soul food restaurant, there is one piece of advice. If you walk by and the aroma does not greet you at the door, keep walking.[91]

Traditionally, the more flavorful and appealing to the senses the soul food is, the more love it is said to have. When this is the case, you will hear responding phrases out of affection, appreciation, and jest reference to soul food dishes such as:

- "It has a lot of love!"
- "It's stinking in here!"

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[87]Iced tea and lemonade are traditional beverages that are served in the South, typically with Sunday dinner or soul food. They are to be served iced cold.

[88]Douglas, *Food in the Social Order,* 131.

[89]A quote by the researcher who is a well experienced southern bred cook and an avid connoisseur of the culinary art form of soul food.

[90]Douglas, *Food in the Social Order,* 116.

[91]Soulfood-Mahalo: http//www.foxhome.com/soulfood/htmls/soulfood.html; Internet (accessed September 3, 2008).

- One of the highest responding honors a soul food cook can receive is: "You put your foot in it!"

The researcher has received all these honorable statements said in reference to her soul food cooking. Particularly, during the implication of her doctor of ministry project, serving soul food was an effective part of her methodology. All of these responding statements were made by the participants of her project.

All of the previously stated sensory traits make up what the term "soul food" implies:

> In the 1960's, Southern-style cooking of Black Americans, now labeled as "Soul food" was due to its roots in American slavery. It was also a reminder that African American slaves paved the way in the development of African American cooking.
>
> Many years ago, black cooks verbally exchanged recipes as they remembered them and today many southerners still cook without a recipe, just by simply remembering main ingredients and adding seasonings to their taste. This way of cooking has produced many great cooks. This is what soul food is all about.[92]
>
> When testing their food for doneness, they used their own senses, and when they 'felt' the need, they added a pinch of this and a dash of that to 'enhance' the flavor of a dish. They just knew by 'instinct' when their food was done as many cooks know today. That's also why you see many recipes that read 'cook until golden brown.'[93]

Great conversation around the dinner table played a major role in the southern upbringing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in shaping his character and ministry. To reiterate as previously stated in chapter two:

> Equally important in the shaping of King's sense of place was the social significance of food and eating. His early development occurred in a place where food and eating played a central part in creating and maintaining *community*. Notions of *good food* were intimately linked to family reunions, funerals, revivals, and

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[92]Soul Food History: http//www.soul-food-advisor.com/Soul-food-History.html; Internet (accessed September 3, 2008).

[93]Ibid.

> gatherings with friends, visitors, and church members. Many of the King family's prayer meetings, discussions, and major decisions took place around the table.[94]

The meals that the King and researchers family ate around the dining room table were soul food dinners (especially on Sundays), often prepared by their mothers and grandmothers. Great conversation and bonding took place during the communal preparation of theses meals as well with other family members and guests assisting or just hanging out in the kitchen. This symbolizes the essence of community. Nothing in all creation exists apart from community:[95]

At the most basic level, all forms of matter seek relationship, connection and communion. [96] Thomas Hawkins goes on to say:

> People grow and find nourishment through the giving and returning of attention and recognition. This flow of care and concern moves from us to others and from others to us. When this rhythm breaks, our lives are broken by alienation and separation. When others fail to acknowledge and recognize us, we feel cut off and alone. Experiences of communion, on the other hand, bridge the spaces that divide us. The need to be known, to have our experience understood and accepted by another, is meat and drink to the human heart.
>
> Life is our lives are gifts that come to us from relationships in community. Nothing is more personal and intimate than our names. Yet we do not name ourselves. We receive our names in the midst of a community that names and claims us. A pastor holds us, pours water on our foreheads, and says, "Mary, I baptize you."
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> If we trace our "natural talents" back to their ultimate source, we discover communities of neighbors, family, mentors, friends, or

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[94]Baldwin, *Balm in Gilead*, 34.

[95]Thomas R. Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 6.

[96]Ibid., 6.

> teachers. None of us are self-made creatures. We are constituted through the communities that have embraced us, loved us, and nurtured us.[97]

As the researcher invokes her perspective project, it is her sincere intent that celebration of our differences through recognizing our commonalities will take place. Implementation of this project proposes to enhance relationships with each other and with God. Hope in discovering our need for one another through the bonds of fellowship within a genuine community of faith is the primary pursuit of the researcher. The researcher will discuss the historical context of classism within the African-American community in the subsequent chapter. In doing so she will bring awareness to the decline of the urban black community, and its' relationship to the Black church.

Historical Foundation

Black Urban Communities before the 1960s

The division between resident and commuter congregations was not always the case.[98] There was a time when the idea of "the local church "was a powerful force in black America via the black community.[99] Dr. McMickle speaks to this local church phenomenon of growing up in the black community of the 1950's and 1960's. McMickle reflects:

> The church was within walking distance of most of its members. Programs such as Scouting, Vacation Bible School, Halloween parties, camping experiences, and other activities for teens and

[97]Ibid.

[98]McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class*, xi.

[99]Ibid.

> children were designed largely for the children of families that belonged to the church. Relationships among church members were sustained only on Sunday morning when they gathered for worship; these people bumped unto each other almost daily in the local grocery stores, barbershops and beauty parlors, movie theaters and parks. The church was part of a much larger black community that interacted socially, politically, and spiritually throughout the week.[100]

In many cases, the present day members of urban churches in transition that live within the urban community are long time residents. They are primarily the elderly persons of the urban congregation that live in close proximity to the church. These elderly persons are commonly the most faithful and loyal members in attendance in Sunday morning worship. The elderly members of an urban church in transition often recall the history, stories and the traditions of the church. Their recollection of the past in is significant to them as they witness the decline of their changed the community. For them their concern for the decline of there community is not only related to its economic disparity, but it is also related to social disparity.

The transition of a neighborhood where its residents have declining values effect both the economic and social construct of that community. This causes a social divide between the long time residents of the urban community with middle class values and its newer lower-class residents. As previously clarified by McMickle, historically, everyone knew one another within the African -American community on a personal social level. However, the contrasting values of the middle and lower class have brought on a social divide. This divide has caused a separation in the relationship between the urban church in transition and its newer residents of the lower-class.

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[100]Ibid., 3.

Therefore, grief among the elderly long time residents of the urban community that attend urban churches in transition becomes a common by-product. This grief among the elderly exists as a result of losing the members their community and church that they knew from long ago. These social losses have occurred mostly as a result of death and suburban migration. McMickle further discusses the historical economic and social relationship of the African American community relative to urban churches in transition:

> Economic disparities existed within the community. People who lived in poverty and people who lived in prosperity were both present. However, they were not strangers to one another because people belonged to the neighborhood church still lived in the community where the church was located. The welfare mother lived across the street from the doctor or dentist. The single mother who worked two jobs to make ends meet knew that her children would pass a federal employee, a small-business owner, or a schoolteacher or administrator as they walked the streets of those neighborhoods. The Greek-letter symbols of black fraternities and sororities were displayed in the windows of every black community in America. You may have been living in poverty yourself, but the promise and possibility of prosperity were always close at hand. And the church was a major part of these communities where black people lived together across lines of income and education.[101]

Historically, the church being a major part of the vitality of the African American community has been on the decline since desegregation. Many in the present black middle class are directly indebted to the efforts and results of the civil rights movement.[102] The Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 opened up educational opportunities long denied to those who came before them.[103] The congressional passing

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[101]McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class*, 4.

[102]Ibid.

[103]Ibid.

of both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 served in the same manner of obtaining the denied justice that was the rightly due to their ancestry.

Important to this historic impact that has been made on the African American community are its early political leaders. The work of such early political leaders as Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Mayor Carl Stokes of Cleveland, and Federal Judge Constance Baker Motley blazed the trail that hundreds of black politicians now walk at every level of government. McMickle further states:

> …The end of segregation in America's schools, neighborhoods, and public accommodations was a historic achievement, the culmination of hundreds of year's human sacrifice, blood and tears. However, in many instances the end of residential segregation brought about an unanticipated negative result- the end of closely knit, richly diverse black communities…As the walls erected by a segregated America were replaced by the doors of opportunity pushed open by the civil rights movement and progressive legislation of the 1960's and 1970's, these close-knit black communities in the inner cities took on a decidedly different character. Many of the black families who were financially able to do so moved to other neighborhoods in the city or into the long forbidden suburbs that offered then a piece of the American dream. Like pioneers of the nineteenth century and immigrants of the twentieth century, these black people ventured forth into sometimes hostile territory. They followed in the footsteps of other ethnic in an exodus out of the inner city. They were looking for better schools, safer streets, or just a single-family home with a front yard and a picket fence.[104]

The existence of a closely knitted African American community has now become nostalgia. This becomes a challenge in doing urban ministry within an African-American community. The social disconnect between those of differing social-economic classes within urban communities has negatively affected their communal bond with one another as it relates to the ministry of urban church. There now exist a huge gap in the

[104]Ibid.

relationship between the middle-class members of urban churches and the lower class residents of its urban communities. Robert C. Linthicum states:

> Now, often a church that sees itself as 'in' but not 'of' its community will have had in earlier days a significant commitment too that community. That church may have been created as a parish church, a church of that specific neighborhood. But then the neighborhood began to change and decay. As that neighborhood began to deteriorate, the people who had lived in that neighborhood and who went to that church began to move out. So, increasingly the church becomes a commuter congregation with people traveling into the city and into that neighborhood. In order to attend the church, but whose lives are lived out in another community. The result is tat they have no stake, no psychological ownership in that community. To be a church in the city is the first response of the church with regard to the city and to its neighborhood....The second response is for a church to perceive itself as a church to the city and a church to the community. In due time, many churches following the scenario I just described, will begin to realize that if they do not interact with their geographical community in some way, they are going to die.[105]

For whole of the African American community, this is an unfortunate reality. This phenomenon has provoked African-American scholars, pastors, and social activists to investigate the discovery of reconciling solutions to the advancement of the African American community and the body of Christ. McMickle goes further to address this phenomenon:

> A phenomenal thing happened with the black middle class after they began their exodus from the neighborhoods of the inner city. They no longer shopped in the stores or played in the parks or even attended the schools in the old neighborhood, but they did keep coming back to their "home church" on Sunday. It may have involved a subway ride in New York, an El ride in Chicago, or a bus or taxi ride from one side of town to the other in other cities across America, but Sunday after Sunday, year after year, they kept coming back to their home church. This was a difference from other ethnic groups. When various white groups who once lived in urban areas began their move into the outlying areas of the city and

[105]Robert C. Linthicum, *Empowering the Poor, Community Organizing Among the City's Rag, Tag and Bobtail* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1991), 22.

> into suburbs, they built new churches or synagogues in new communities in which they now lived. Often they would sell their former church buildings to black groups looking to start new churches in the areas that the whites had fled.
>
> To their credit, even after they moved out of the inner city, members of the black middle class would return to their home church every Sunday. However, that sense of home involved the church building itself, not necessarily the neighborhood in which the church was located. With fewer and fewer members of the church still living in the surrounding community, the church was rapidly becoming a place where a transient population gathered to worship and where a resident population turned for social services. More often than not, the two groups did not really know each other, and neither group worked very hard at trying to change that. They shared racial ancestry, but beyond that they increasingly had little else in common.[106]

Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Dr. Cornell West address the issues of classism in their book entitled: *The Future of the Race.* They reference a historically relevant quote from Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr., that speaks to the decline of black urban communities in America. Martin Luther King, Jr. charged that "many middle-class Negroes have forgotten their roots," and are "untouched by the agonies and struggles of their under-privileged brothers."[107] However, historically this has not been the traditional ethos of African Americans in connection to the struggles and conditions of the poor. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses the issues of classism within the African American community in his book entitled: *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. King suggests that the African American community should unite in organizing strategies and programming that will produce growth and change in the struggles for injustice. King states further:

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[106] Ibid., 3, 4.

[107] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornell West, *The Future of the Race* (New York, NY: Vintage: 1996), 10.

> More and more, the civil rights movement will have to engage in the task of organizing people into permanent groups to protect their own interests and produce change in their behalf. This task is tedious, and lacks the drama of demonstrations, but it is necessary for meaningful results.
>
> It is especially important for the Negro middle class to join this action program. To say that all too many members of the Negro middle class have been detached spectators rather involved participants in the great drama of social change taking place on the stage of American history is not to overlook the unswerving dedication and unselfish service of some. But many middle-class Negroes have forgotten their roots and are more concerned about 'conspicuous consumption' than about the cause of injustice. Instead, they seek to sit in some serene and passionless realm of isolation, untouched and unmoved by the agonies and struggles of their underprivileged brothers. This kind of selfish detachment caused the masses of Negroes to feel alienated not only from white society but also from the Negro middle class. They feel that the average middle-class Negro has no concern for plight.[108]

Sadly enough, the lack of concern exhibited by the African-American middle class has infiltrated the churches response to the struggles of the poor. The African-American church has historically been the pillar of African American community. The African-American community has experienced a breach in their cohesiveness to address the causes of social injustice. The causes of injustice for any people affect all people. This was a common theme through out the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for social and civil injustice; although, there existed a lack of concern by the African-American middle-class for their underprivileged brothers and sisters. This lack of concern does not exist among all African-American middle-class, as previously indicated by Dr. King. However, since the time of Dr. King's declaration concerning this matter, there has been an increase of poverty among African-Americans.

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[108] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston , MA: Beacon Press, 1967), 131.

What the African-American middle-class failed to realize is that the economic plight of the United States is causing a decline in the middle-class across ethnic lines. What was once the plight of the masses has and is yet becoming the plight of the middle-class in America. In 1967 pointed Dr. King out where we as African-Americans need to go from here? This proclamation still applies towards the plight of African-Americans today. King declares the following antidote:

> It is time for the Negro haves to join hands with the Negro have – nots and, with compassion, journey into that other country of hurt and denial. It is time for the Negro middle class to rise up from its stool of indifference, to retreat from its flight into unreality and to bring its full resources-its heart, its mind and its checkbook-to the aid of the less fortunate brother. The salvation of the Negro middle class is ultimately dependent upon the salvation of the Negro masses.[109]

What Dr. King is suggesting here is a challenge to all middle-class African Americans. This challenge means that middle-class African Americans will have to experience a metamorphosis in their way of thinking about the future of the Black race. This way of thinking cannot be absent of considering their theology and remembering their African American historical past. This type of critical reflection will reveal that African Americans are not solely individuals, but they are a people. Their way of thinking must now consider their sins as people and their triumphs as a people. Therefore, Dr. King's pertinent question must now be asked again in this twenty-first century. Dr. King's question still resounds: Where do we go from here? Dr. King's previously stated response gave a clear answer: "The salvation of the Negro middle class is ultimately

[109]Ibid., 132.

dependent upon the salvation of the Negro masses."[110] Further excerpts from Dr. King's response state the following profound thoughts:

> A final challenge that we face as a result of our great dilemma is to be ever mindful of enlarging the whole society, and giving it a new sense of values as we seek to solve our particular problem. As we work to get rid of the economic strangulation that we face as a result of poverty, we must not overlook the fact that millions of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Indians and Appalachian whites are also poverty- stricken. Any serious war against poverty must of necessity include them. As we work t o end the educational stagnation that we face as a result of inadequate segregated schools, we must not be unmindful of the fact, as Dr. James Conant has said, the whole public school system is using nineteenth-century educational methods in conditions of twentieth urbanization, and that quality education must be enlarged for all children. By and large, the civil rights movement has followed this course, and in so doing has contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. In winning rights for ourselves we have produced substantial benefits for the whole nation.[111]

Historically, from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement in America, the struggles of African Americans enhanced their bond with one another and with other nationalities. Throughout history, the plight of African Americans has been overcome with the help and support of other nationalities. Various nationalities have also benefited from the victories that African Americans have received in overcoming their many obstacles of injustice.

The African American church has ironically contributed to the triumphs and to the decline of the African American community. The middle-class African American church and their lack of concern for the conditions of the poor have been the greatest downfall to the African American community. However, historically emphasis upon the poor has

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[110]Ibid.

[111]Ibid., 133.

been an intricate part of mainline denominations,[112] especially among Methodists. The Methodist ministry context of the researcher comes from this rich legacy of charity and inter-personal concern for the plight of the poor. The Poor and the People Called Methodists:[113]

From the beginning, the Wesleyan movement of the eighteenth century, like Christianity itself, was largely a movement of and for the poor.[114] An Oxford don, John Wesley attempted to imitate the life and ministry of Jesus Christ to the marginalized and disenfranchised.[115] John Wesley's focus was on the working class. Wesley brought together evangelical zeal and social outreach in a manner that focused on their needs.[116] The early Methodist movement emphasized inclusiveness on the basis of gods love for all human kind. Strong intentional efforts were made to adhere to the physical and the spiritual needs of the poor. These efforts were made through extensive evangelism and outreach on a personal one on one basis of doing ministry. The Wesleyan program of outreach to society is a defining element of the Methodist heritage.[117] Heitzenrater declares further:

> The general outlines of the early Methodists' work with the poor is well known and often repeated. Methodists gathered clothes and food to send to the poor; opened free medical clinics to draw in the sick from the streets; and stood on street corners and begged for the poor. Closer examination reveals that these descriptions are not fully

[112]The researcher emphasizes mainline denominations in reference to the massive African-American membership within them.

[113]Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002), cover page.

[114]Ibid., 211.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People, 211.*

[117]Ibid.

> accurate, and the particulars of the Methodists' efforts are even less familiar. The reasons for such a program of charitable activities are often ignored or misunderstood, and the context-the concept of poverty and the nature of the problem in eighteenth century England-is largely unknown to most Methodists today. As a result, the picture of the poor, and the people called Methodists, as typically portrayed, is largely incomplete, typically inaccurate, and therefore terribly inadequate.[118]

Although the Methodists of today are greatly involved in outreach and evangelism, as a whole they seem to have experienced a great decrease in their passion in comparison to the early Methodists. However, there remain some of the influences of eighteenth-century Methodism as is evidenced today when we see:

- Early Methodists were primarily manual laborers and often destitute
- Later Methodists tended to be business persons and more affluent
- Early Methodists had a mission to the poor of society
- Early Methodists stood on the street corner and begged for the poor[119]

None of these statements is entirely accurate, as we shall see. Some other impressions can be gleaned from Methodist writings:

- Early Methodists were all poor (Wesley himself says that)
- Early Methodists distanced themselves from upper classes
- Wesley himself lived on the edges of poverty[120]

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[118]Ibid., 15.

[119]Ibid., 25.

[120] Ibid.

John Wesley's attitude of ministry toward the poor influenced the Methodists involvement in ministry to the poor. Beginning in England, Wesley was sensitive to the needs and the conditions of the prisoners, orphans, widows, and the homeless wherever he resided or traveled. In particular, Wesley contributed to the educational needs of poor children that were without teachers. He provided teachers for these children and influenced many Methodists to teach them free of charge. Wesley was convinced that he was not worthy of receiving the benefits of the pleasures of life if others did not. In one instance, Wesley tells of a poor girl who visited him one winter day. This poor girl appeared to be cold and hungry. Author Richard P. Heitzenrater tells of this story from the archives of Wesley's journals:

> You seem half starved,' he said. 'Have you nothing to cover you but that thin line gown?' When she said that was all she had, Wesley put his hand in his pocket and found that he had scarcely any money left, having just purchased some framed pictures for his rooms. His later recollection of this scene drips with self-critical sarcasm:
>
> It immediately struck me, will not thy Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward!' thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from cold!' O justice! O Mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid![121]

Wesley's compassion and grace towards the poor was obviously immeasurable. He did not have to search out the poor; they sat right there in front of him on the benches of his preaching houses.[122] He did not have to go to another part of town to find some poor people to assist- he could have put signs on the Methodist preaching houses that

[121]Ibid., 28.

[122]Ibid.

read, 'The Poor R Us.'[123] Wesley believed that it was a privilege and a God granted opportunity to be able to serve the poor. This theme of belief is historically the mindset of Methodism. However, today's mindset within Methodism is directed more towards the theme: 'The Poor R Not Us.'[124]

Methodism served people from all walks of life as a whole. Strides were made to avoid social-economic status distinctions. Distinctions of social-economic class among Methodists were not made with the intentions of obtaining spiritual benefits in doing so. Enhanced relationships between Methodists of differing socio-economic classes were primary spiritual benefits. The early Methodists were personally hands on when interacting with the poor in ministry. Heitzenrater elaborates further:

> This approach entailed tearing down the barriers that separated the children of God and the community of faith, as well as turning with compassion to all neighbors and responding to their needs as Christ would have, 'who went about doing good.'
>
> Can the problem of poverty be solved? Wesley thought so. At the very least, he thought the Methodists could do away with destitution in their midst-and not simply by eliminating the poor from their membership roles or by narrowing the definitions of poverty. He saw the model solution in the New Testament-in the sharing community in Acts, which was bound not by secular laws but by the law of love. To love God and neighbor will always result in acts of assistance for those with needs greater than one's own.
>
> Love and empathy are at the heart of the Wesleyan theology and the 'method' of the Methodist mission. As he told the members in his societies, 'Put yourself in the place of every poor [person]. Dealing with the poor was simply a consistent part of his overall scheme that looked toward the building of a community of faith in which everyone's needs would be sufficiently met. Wesley launched toward that goal, held to that hope, and acted consistently

[123]Ibid.

[124]This theme is a quote from the researcher's years of ministry in Methodism.

> with that purpose, supported by a host of followers who were themselves mostly 'the poor.'[125]

Transitioning urban Methodists churches are for the most part located in low-income communities. However, they do not traditionally focus on meeting the spiritual and physical needs of the poor. They often may assist the poor, but it is not their primary focus of doing ministry. Monetary contributions are more often made to local or foreign missions than to one on one inter-personal ministry to the poor. Wesley's theology for doing ministry was to physically touch and personally identify with the poor.

According to Wesley, the living conditions of the poor were of a universal concern. In fact, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, India stated to her co-workers: "If we want the poor people to see Christ in us, we have to see the image of Christ in the poor."[126] An increase in communal fellowship among persons of differing social-economic classes within Methodism will allow for this experience to be revealed one to another. This type of mutual insight overrides our perception of ones individual social status in the midst of fellowship. Wayne A. Meeks, professor of religious studies at Yale University, eludes that every one within every society is comparative to a social status. Meeks suggests:

> In every society the status of a person, family, or other group is determined by the composite of many different clues, status indicators…Most individuals tend to measure themselves by the standards of some group that is very important to them-their reference group, whether or not they belong to it-rather than by the standards of the whole society.[127]

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[125]Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People,* 37.

[126]Ibid., 39.

[127]Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 54.

Small Group Fellowship within Methodism

Small Groups – in which six to twelve people regularly gather to talk about their spiritual journeys, study the Bible, and pray – have become an integral and dynamic part of modern American Church life.[128] They have helped transform thousands of churches and millions of individuals. Though many think they were invented in the last couple of decades, they've been around in one form or another since the early 1700's with the ministry of Methodist founders John and Charles Wesley.[129]

> Methodism began as a movement in eighteenth-century England, part of the larger Protestant evangelical revival that endeavored to bring spiritual renewal to the nation and to increase the effectiveness of the church's ministry, especially to the poor. The term "Methodist" was applied about 1729 to a small group of students who devoted themselves to a strict method of study and religious practice.[130]

John Wesley not only incorporated small group fellowship into Methodism, but he also incorporated the influences of the Moravian culture into Methodism as a result of his personal experience and relationship with the Moravian culture, such as the testimony of his inspiration for conversion on his missionary journey to Georgia and the celebrated tradition of the Moravian Love Feast. A central aspect of Wesley's class meetings and societies was also their support of the poor.[131]

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[128]Christianity Today, Home Page: http://www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles/findinggod.html; Internet (accessed 13 March 2007).

[129]Ibid.

[130]Ibid.

[131]Mike Mather, *Vital Ministry in the Small-Membership Church: Sharing Stories Shaping Community* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989), 38.

> Wesley's classes and societies were the precursors of the micro lending movements of today. Wesley's Methodists invested in the poor by supporting the establishment of spinning and knitting cooperatives and other ventures. They also invested in peoples gifts so that they wouldn't have to stay mired in poverty. Wesley was sure that God touched every aspect of human life. They did this because they knew that people have a responsibility to the poor-including, but not limited to, Christian people. Today's church has too often turned our eyes away from this type of action.
>
> Small membership churches (or small group fellowships) can be a font of vitality for the local communities in which they reside. They can be places that pay attention to the gifts of people. Although they may not have much money, they can find ways to invest in someone's gifts (It really doesn't cost all that much). The only resources truly needed are beloved children of God and a little imagination.[132]

It is the researcher's goal through her perspective project to provide an avenue of "Redemption" whereby improvement or deliverance of ones condition takes place. This will be liberally available the through support, nurture, healing, and empowerment of women from all walks of life. As they collaborate together stirring up each others natural and spiritual gifts, they will experience mutual redemption and growth will take place. This in turn will influence their individual and collective divine purpose, and inter-personal relationship with God, the urban community, and one another.

Biblical Foundation

The researcher suggests two main biblical texts that provide special insight in regards to the issues of classism. These two biblical texts come from the Old and the New Testaments. The researcher will provide exegetical responses to the Book of Ruth and Acts 10: 9-16.

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[132]Ibid., 39.

Classism in the Book of Ruth

Classism is depicted within the context of the book of Ruth on three levels (This is not to suggests that racism and sexism were not relevant issues in the texts). Firstly, Ruth and Orpah were Moabites who married Mahlon and Kilon who were Israelites. This is an ironic occurrence in that the Israelites were forbidden to marry anyone who worshipped idol gods and was an enemy of God. In Deuteronomy 23: 2-4, the Moabites refused to give food to the Israelites during the Exodus from Egypt. Therefore the Moabites were cursed as a result.

Secondly, Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi were of widow status in the patriarchal society of Israel. And, thirdly all three of these were childless. "Great social weight was accorded to clan loyalty during the time of the judges, as was continuance of the family line, always through the male."[133] "Ancient Israel placed a harsh social stigma on women with no children; to have been blessed with sons and then to have lost them was clear evidence of God's wrath."[134] Being childless was a social stigma that was characterized by unfair treatment and oppression.

Background of the Book of Ruth

The relationship of Ruth the Moabites, and Naomi the Judean, unfolds in the book of Ruth as a story of love and redemption. The author is unknown; however, Talmudic tradition gives authorship to Samuel. The book of Ruth is a narrative that tells of the

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[133]Mary J. Evans and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL, 2002), 147.

[134] Evans Kroeger, *Women's Bible Commentary, 147.*

events that directly address family function and inter-personal relationships relative to gender, age, religion, ethnicity and culture. The author has taken the changing fortunes of a single family and created a work of art,[135] illustrating the theme of redemption throughout the biblical text.

Repetition indicates that "redemption" is a key concern in the story of Ruth.[136] The book is only eighty-five verses long, but the word "redeem" and its derivatives (redeemer," "redemption") are used some twenty-three times, therefore asking who or what is redeemed leads to the discovery that Naomi is the ultimate recipient of redemption in the story.[137] If the story told in the book of Ruth is to be redemptive for the people of God, then the people of God must identify themselves with the one who is redeemed.[138]

The action of the book of Ruth is set in the tumultuous period of the judges (c. 1100) B.C.).[139] It may be that the book's original intention was to provide a politically important genealogy for David (Ruth 4:17-22).[140]

Ruth 4:17-22

> [17] The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. [18] This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, [19] Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of [20] Amminadab the father of Nashon, Nashon the father of Salmon, [21]

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[135]Coleman, Peace, and Quinn, *Serendipity Bible*, 383.

[136]Neil M. Alexander, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Publishing, 1998), 892.

[137]Ibid.

[138]Ibid.

[139]Alexander, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 383.

[140]Ibid.

> Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, [22] Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

The story goes to great lengths to legitimize his Moabite connections.[141] This was important since Moabite women were considered immoral by many in Israel.[142] The author takes an outsider of questionable background, Ruth, and shows her to be a person about whom God is vitally concerned.[143] Above all the book of Ruth characterizes the bonding relationship of two women (Ruth and Naomi) who were from different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds who found mutual commonality through their personal life struggles beyond social boundaries. Let us examine the relationship between Ruth and Naomi further. An analysis of Orpah will also be discussed in conjunction with controversial recent scholarship relevant to liberation theology.

Relationship of Ruth Naomi, and Orpah

The supposed setting for Ruth and Naomi's relationship takes place during the time when judges ruled. There was a famine in the land of Bethlehem-Judah where Naomi, her husband Elimelech and their two sons lived. They were all of Judeans, yet because of the famine in their homeland, they decided to immigrate to the city of Moab. However, the Israelites and the Moabites were at enmity with each other. Ruth 1:1-2

> In the days when judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's

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[141]Ibid.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Ibid.

> name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilon.They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.[144]

According to noted theologian Katherine Farmer's commentary on the book of Ruth; in Ruth 1:2 the sojourners are said to be "Ephrathites," which in this context seems to be the name of a clan or sub-tribal grouping.[145] The source of I Chronicles 2:19-20, 50 suggests that Bethlehem was founded by the descendants of a woman named Ephrath, the wife of Caleb.[146] I Chronicles 2:19-20, 50.

> When Azubah died, Caleb married Ephrath, who bore him Hur. Hur was the father of Uri, and Uri the father of Bezalel.These were the descendants of Caleb. The sons of Hur the firstborn of Ephrathah: Shobal the father of Kiriath Jearim.

It is particularly appropriate for a story that centers on a woman to identify her family by the name of the clan's matriarch.[147] The narrator of Genesis 35:19 considers "Ephrathah" simply another name for Bethlehem.[148] Yet, in the country of Moab two women from different cultures who had known each other for years in that Naomi was the mother-in-law to Ruth, embarks upon a brand new relational journey that united them by the bonds of faith and love. Ruth 1: 3-22

> Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two

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[144]Ibid., 384.

[145]Ibid., 900.

[146]Ibid.

[147]Alexander, *The New Interpreter's Bible, 900.*

[148]Ibid.

daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. [8] Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. [9] May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud [10] and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." [11] But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you become your husbands? [12]Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me-even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons-[13] would you wait until they grew up? Would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" [14] At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her. [15] "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her. [16] But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. [17] Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me," [18]

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. [19] So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi? [20] "Don't call me Naomi, she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very biter. [21] I went away full, but the Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." [22] So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

The name Naomi means "my pleasant one." The name Ruth means "rose" or "companion". Yet these two women both find themselves facing unpleasant circumstances and the loss of their companions (husbands). However, in the end they both display the beauty of a rose despite the story of their mutual tragedy and loss. The life of Ruth and Naomi take a drastic turn when Naomi's husband dies leaving her a widow. Some time later, Naomi's two sons die, leaving Naomi with

two daughter-in-laws who are now childless widows. The status of a childless widow was unfortunate, and the law demanded fair treatment of the widow.[149]

> Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.[150]

The law also required fair treatment of the widows as implied in Deuteronomy 24:19 which states "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. God is a protector of the widows, displaying His compassion and mercy as noted in Psalms 68:5 "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling."[151] Thus the three widows Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah embark on their journey to Bethlehem. Here in preceding biblical text three women from different cultures facing similar struggles and life circumstances with one of the women (Naomi) being a Judean Israelite and an elderly widow and the other two being Moabites and young widows. Yet, they all are found in relationship with each other despite their differences in culture, ethnicity and age.

Through the incidents of mutual tragedy and struggle, the dynamics of their relationship changed. The two women experience love and redemption as they unite in the midst of their mutual tragedy and struggle in order to find resolution in their response to what has happened to each by way of unfortunate events.

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[149]Charles M. Laymon, *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary or the Bible* (Nashville, TN Abingdon Press, 1971), 948.

[150]Ibid., 948.

[151] Lamon, *Interpreter's*, 799, 800.

Although, Naomi had been mother-in-law to Orpah for years, it was not until Naomi found a common thread of struggle, need and brokenness between herself, Ruth and Orpah that they were all bonded together emotionally and spiritually (Ruth 1:9,10). Naomi pleads with her daughter-in-laws to return to their homeland. Orpah decides to return to her homeland of Moab adhering to Naomi's plea to do so (Ruth 1:15), but Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law clinging to Naomi's culture, traditions, and religion. As previously referenced, Ruth poetically displays a desire assimilate to the Israelite culture in Ruth 1:16, 17, by stating: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God."

Traditionally, Ruth's decision has been viewed in a positive manner, making her a heroine. Orpah's decision to return to her mother's home has been viewed in a negative manner, making her insignificant to the biblical narrative. However, recent scholarship has criticized the story of Ruth. Conversations from the Third World have flipped the script by arguing a case for Orpah, upholding her as the heroine in the book of Ruth. Biblical scholar and feminist Bonnie J. Miller-McClemore suggests:

> But what of Orpah? Her story-my story and the story of many women caught between such clearly defined ideals of womanhood-is oddly untold. Theological tradition, the church and now feminist theology have admired and idealized Ruth's decision to follow her late husbands's mother, while virtually ignoring the courage and conflicts of Orpah, the forgotten daughter, sister and friend who chooses to 'return to her mother's house' (Ruth 1:8). Granted, 'she dies to the story,' as Trible notes, because she takes a course that does not follow the 'dynamic of the tale.' She simply chooses another path....Rethinking her position might allow us to reconsider the struggles of many contemporary women whom both mainline congregations and feminist theologians have overlooked.

> No two women in the Ruth narrative act in the same way. Nor is judgment about the adequacy and rightness proclaimed....Yet readers of this text have clung to Ruth as the right way; she follows the call of a new God. But Orpah is not just the opposite of Ruth. She has her own story to tell. She makes a most difficult decision to reclaim something of her maternal past and to return to 'the mother's house.' Orpah has not chosen wrongly; she has chosen differently....If the Book of Ruth is to function truly as a 'theological interpretation of feminism,' then we must read it with its full cast of characters.[152]

In the researcher's context of ministry women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds gather for worship together both from either urban or suburban settings. The place of worship is in an urban neighborhood, but the majority population or the dominant population of the church is of a middle class mindset. Those of an urban mindset are not visibly or actively involved in the mainstream of the life of the church socially or administratively. However, through the mutual struggle of existing in an urban context of ministry by church locale, both groups of worshippers are bound together.

However, there still exists a difference between them on the basis of culture and class that manifests separation, a lack of empathy, and rejection one for the other. Take for instance the relationship between Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah where Ruth found an appreciation for Naomi's culture and manner of worship, although Ruth came from another culture; ethnically, religiously and socially.

However, Orpah identified more so with her own cultural traditions by choosing not to continue relational ties with Naomi, thus rejecting Naomi's cultural

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[152]Bonnie J. Miller-McClemore, *The Christian Century,* The Christian Century Foundation, (20 April 1991), 430.

traditions. Instead Orpah is upheld by women of The Third World for not assimilating Naomi's cultural traditions, and chooses to cleave to her own. Likewise, urban class women should not be made by anyone to change, cover-up, or be ashamed of who they are because social-economic status or cultural values and traditions.

Naomi out of her own pain and struggle and sense of empathy for Ruth or Orpah pleaded with them to return to their own culture. Relevant circumstances often arise in the mindsets of those who attend an urban church in transition that are of a suburban mindset although they themselves may too reside in an urban neighborhood. That mindset is to feel that those from the urban culture should attend a church that is conducive to their particular culture and ethnicity. This is because the cultural values and gifts of the urban class are often not highly valued or welcomed by those with middle class and traditional values.

Biblical scholar Laura E. Donaldson is of Cherokee descent. Donaldson brings new meaning to the Ruth narrative through the lenses of the marginalized. Donaldson elaborates:

> To the Cherokee women, for example, Orpah connotes hope rather than perversity, because she is the one who does not reject her traditions or her sacred ancestors. Like Cherokee women have done for hundreds if not thousands of years, Orpah chooses the house of her clan and spiritual mother over the desire for another culture. In fact Cherokee women not only chose the mother's house, they also owned it (along with the property upon which it stood as well as the gardens surrounding it). Read through these eyes, the book of Ruth tells a very different story indeed.[153]

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[153] R. S. Surgirharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 200), 167, 168.*

However, Ruth embraced Naomi, but she went a step further to embrace Naomi's culture as well. Here we see evidence of cultural exchange where Naomi, the Judean Israelite, resided for a period of time in Moab (as likening to the middle class women in an urban church-in-transition) living in the midst of a foreign culture and manner of worship. Likewise, we see Ruth the Moabites (likening to the women in an urban church in transition) embracing a culture that is not her own while maintaining her own culture and sense of identity, as she is still referred to as a Moabites through the text as depicted in (Ruth 2: 5, 6) signifying possible cultural tension:

> Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" The foreman replied, "She is the Moabites who came back from Moab with Naomi."

On the contrary, Orpah did not embrace Naomi's cultural traditions, but returned to her own culture and manner of worship. The researcher views Orpah in two contrasting analogies. The researcher suggests Orpah is to be commended for not allowing her cultural identity to be overshadowed by the cultural values of what would be characterized by the mainstream of society. This often occurs where the marginalized are in the minority amongst the status quo.

Orpah is also likening to those who find it most difficult or not conducive to their need to embrace the culture of others especially when it comes to social and spiritual relational bonds. It becomes easier to relate to the familiar, even when it comes to bonding social relationships contributing to a cultural divide. However, through a spiritual relational connection, the cultural divide becomes a cultural connection through finding the commonalities in the midst of our differences,

whether culturally, ethnically, socially, or economically as in accordance to the text of this hymn:

> Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.
>
> We share each others woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing fear.[154]

Ruth and Naomi embark upon a brand new relationship of mutual love and acceptance that emerges out of the foundational common bonds of faith and love as noted for us today in the New Testament text: Philippians 2: 1-4.

> If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Relative to the above biblical text, Ruth and Naomi were "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose," as they were unselfishly concerned about each others well-being despite their cultural and ethnic differences. They both found compassion for one another as displayed in their acts of humility throughout the biblical narrative of the book of Ruth. Surely, it took faith and love on both their parts, for their relationship to grow closer as their mindset, culture, and purpose become united in the midst of their struggle and cultural differences. Ruth, being a Moabites who was a young widow and childless was challenged by the tension of being in a patriarchal society where being a childless widow was looked at as unfortunate of a lesser social status. This

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[154]*The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 557.

occurrence is according to Hebrew culture and tradition as previously referred to in Isaiah 1:23.

> Being a mother was the most prestigious position for a woman in the ancient world. This position had two sides. First, towards her husband she was the one who had begotten his child or children. Secondly, towards her son(s) and/or daughter(s) she was a parent.
>
> With regard to the reproductive role of a woman, we have seen that status of a wife could become endangered if she did not bear a child to her husband. She sometimes would be downgraded or even divorced.[155]

The same sense of tension and alienation can exist within urban ministries in transition where one's unfortunate state of being due to the urban conditions of poverty; poor educational opportunities; low economic and housing standards; the absence of a male patriarch in the home or in one's upbringing. The adverse conditions of the high rate of teenage pregnancy; crime; substance abuse; can have a detrimental impact on the social relationships between those of an urban environment and those from a middle class environment, even within the church.

As in biblical instances where the childless widow was shunned by the larger society, so it is that those who have directly been affected by the onset of the unfortunate circumstances of life as lived in the urban community can experience a lack of social attention and intimate fellowship from those of the larger population of the church whose life experience and circumstance are opposite that of the life experiences of the urban environment.

Ruth and Naomi (though childless widows) retreated to Bethlehem together. Upon their arrival, all of Bethlehem was stirred up as the women of the town

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[155]Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden, UK: Brill Publishers, 2003), 191.

greeted Naomi with great affirmation saying: "Can this be Naomi (Ruth 1:19)" The words communicated a mixture of delight and dismay.[156]

> After more than ten years of living in a foreign land, Naomi is almost unrecognizable. Moreover, she is accompanied not by her men folk but by an unknown woman. The women's query is thus provoked, in part, by Ruth's presence with Naomi. The Moabite Ruth signifies Naomi's changed circumstances, her estrangement from Israel. Naomi is not the same woman who left Bethlehem with her fully intact; she is bereaved, widowed, uprooted from her land. Indeed, Naomi disavows her former identity: she is no longer Naomi ("pleasant") but Mara ("bitter"). And in her bitterness, she declares herself to be utterly "empty," even with her devoted companion resolutely standing beside her. This reticence concerning Ruth is mirrored in Naomi's countrywomen, who neither speak to nor inquire about the Moabite woman. Hence, Ruth's initial reception in Bethlehem is marked by non-recognition; no one- including her mother-in-law-acknowledges her.[157]

Whether women are from a different cultural or social status or whether they are from the same cultural or social status, there exist gaps of communication, acceptance, and social bonding within the social circles of women from all walks of life regardless of their culture or social status. In parallel, the social construct of relationships change in an urban ministry in transition, where new relationships are formed bridging across boundaries of inequality, culture, ethnicity, and class to the point that mutual transformation begins to take place, whereby there is such a change in the hearts and mindsets among the congregation that the ministry becomes "unrecognizable to

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[156]Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katherine Doob Sakenfeld* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 94.

[157]Sakenfeld, *Engaging the Bible*, 94.

onlookers from ten years ago."[158] A basis for mutual transformation within an urban ministry in transition is highlighted in the irony that Naomi's emptiness has been overturned through the agency of the Moabite woman whom she had so easily dismissed.[159]

Naomi is yet affirmed by the fruit of her mentoring relationship with Ruth where Naomi wisely advises Ruth as to remarrying. As a result of their mentoring relationship, Ruth is married to Boaz (a close relative of Naomi) and bears a son. However, there are persons who argue that Naomi is pimping Ruth out in a selfish manner. Biblical scholar Laura Donaldson states: After Elimelech and his two sons die, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. Naomi subsequently, and recklessly according to some critics, sends her daughter-in-law into the fields of Boaz, a relative of her late husband…." We see this controversial happening in the biblical passage noted below: Ruth 2: 22, 23; 3:1-5.

> Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." [23] So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.
>
> One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered.

[158]Ibid.

[159]Ibid., 99.

Naomi and Ruth develop a mutual bond of trust under the umbrella of a mentoring type of relationship where though they come from different cultures they respected the values and gifts of one another where they both gleaned from and were blessed by each other. Based on the perspective of scholars like Donaldson that revealed the "ugly" side of relationships, the researcher raises the question: "At what cost?" Ruth received and was blessed by Naomi's gifts of maturation, wisdom, affirmation, faith, love, acceptance, admiration and encouragement. Naomi received and was blessed by Ruth's gifts of innocence, being teachable, compassion, faith, love, loyalty, acceptance, obedience, and family. Therefore, the researcher suggests that alongside the beauty of diversity in reference to relationships there exists the so called ugly side of imperfections that allow for redemption.

Within the urban church in transition, there exist women from diverse cultures who have similar gifts to share with another through the bonds of fellowship through relationship with Jesus Christ and to each other. Where in the sharing of life experiences and gifts they too will conceive and give birth to the formation of new sisterly relationships; a greater sense of self-worth; and a greater appreciation and love for God and one another, by sending a prophetic witness into the public square that all are welcome and accepted in the House of God, creating a witness within the House of God among the entire congregation that extends to the neighboring beloved community where all are worthy of receiving God's grace even from one another. The question was asked in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 10:29) "Who is thy neighbor?" I ask who is thy sister? Eunny P. Lee suggests:

> The story of Ruth the Moabite challenges our narrow exclusivism, a perennial issue in human history. Perhaps it is all the more important for us to attend to this book in an age when the global community is so deeply driven with difference. Even societies that pride themselves for recognition and dignity for all citizens. The emphasis on narrow special interests may in fact lead to division rather than mutuality and the promotion of the common good. Ruth teaches both the moral significance of difference and the possibility of kinship with the "other." It broadens our understanding of who is neighbor, who is family, who is welcome in our midst.[160]

Background of the Book of Acts

The Book of Acts is one of the most exciting and challenging books of the Christian Bible.[161] This was taken into consideration in the researcher's selection of her New Testament biblical exegesis for this ministry project. The church's beginnings can be traced back to the book of Acts. The book of Acts traces its growth all the way from Jerusalem to imperial Rome.[162] The writer of the book of Acts is unknown. However, Luke the physician who is the author of the Gospel of Luke is traditionally credited with this writing. The final events recorded in the Book of Acts took place in early A.D. 60. Acts is said to have been compiled some time after that time. [163]

Bible scholar William Willimon suggests that the book of Acts was written between A.D. 70 and 100. The researcher finds the theme of the book of Acts to be most relevant to the theme of her project. The theme of the Book of Acts is the

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[160]Sakenfeld, *Engaging the Bible*, 100.

[161]*New Interpreter's Bible, 3.*

[162]Ibid.

[163]*Serendipity Bible, 1516.*

spreading of the Gospel to the unknown world.[164] This theme implies crossing boundaries of race, class, and culture. In doing so, the writer of the book of Acts focuses on the two leading figures in the early church: Peter, the apostle to the Jews and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.[165] For the purposes of this project, the researcher will examine Acts 10: 1-48 in reference to the vision of Peter and his mission to the Gentiles.

The Vision of Peter

Introduction

The vision of Peter takes place while he is praying on the roof of Simon the Tanners house in the city of Joppa (Acts 9:43; 10:9). Peter residing in the house of a tanner brings irony to this biblical narrative. Peter being a pious Jew was a strict observer of the Jewish laws of ritual impurity (Leviticus 11) in not touching anything that was considered unclean. However, Simon was a Tanner who worked with his hands at a hard smelly job processing animal skins.[166] This was a profession that was looked down upon by the Jews. In fact, as a tanner Simon belongs to a profession despised by the Jews.[167]

Also, ironically Peter's ministry and fellowship to the Gentiles extends even further to the conversion of Cornelius and his household. Cornelius was a Gentile resident of Caesarea who was a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. Luke refers to Cornelius as a God fearing man (13:16, 26; 16:14), i.e. a

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[164]Ibid.

[165]Ibid.

[166]Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi, KE: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 1318.

[167]Laymon, *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary of the Bible*, 741.

Gentile who attended the synagogue, accepted Jewish monotheism and ethics, but did not become a proselyte.[168] His piety is demonstrated by much prayer to God and generosity in giving alms liberally to the people (the Jews).[169]

Both Peter and Cornelius received a vision from God that together influenced Peter's inclusiveness of all people (both Jew and Gentile) and Cornelius's conversion. Cornelius being a devout man was a strict observer of the Jewish hours of prayer. It is befitting that Cornelius received a vision from God during the ninth hour of prayer. The ninth hour of prayer was 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon. Receiving a vision at the time of prayer is a common biblical theme in its occurrence. In Cornelius's vision he is told to send men to Joppa to call for Peter. The simultaneous visions of Peter and Cornelius were not mere coincidences in the thought of Luke.[170]

Each vision emphasized and clarified the other.[171] With Peter's religious scruples, well entrenched in his Jewish consciousness, had to give way.[172] The entire episode is exceedingly instructive to one who seeks light upon problems of internationalism and inter-racial contacts in the present time.[173] Classism therefore becomes a major issue when viewing the problems of

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[168]Ibid.

[169]Laymon, *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary of the Bible*, 741.

[170]Frederick Carl Eislen, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (New York, NY: Abingdon, 1929), 1104.

[171]Ibid.

[172]Ibid.

[173]Ibid.

internationalism and inter-racial contacts. The importance of this narrative for Luke cannot be overestimated; it describes the beginning of the Gentile mission....[174]

Acts 10: 9-23

> About noon the following day as they were on their journey approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal as being prepared, he fell onto a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' 'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure that god has made clean.' the voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' this happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.
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> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them. Peter went down and said to the men, I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" The men replied, 'We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into his house to be his guests.

The vision of Peter is depicted in Acts 10: 9-23 entailing a theme of redemption in redeeming what was considered unclean under the Jewish laws of ritual impurity as now clean. The general role of visions in Acts is to clarify God's redemptive plan with regard to specific places and people.[175] This is the moment

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[174] Ibid.

[175] Alexander, *The New Interpreter's Bible, 163.*

new religions or sects are born-when what has hitherto been taken for granted as a fundamental and defining principle is called into question, and the question is heard as the voice of God.[176] Biblical scholar William Baird introduces Peter's vision in noting the following:

> The next day after Cornelius has sent for him Peter is praying on the housetop. Palestinian houses were flat roofed with an outside stairway. Although noon (the sixth hour) is not one of the regular times of daily prayer, it is recommended by Psalms 55:17. Luke's purpose is to present Peter's hunger at lunchtime. While food is being prepared he falls into a trance-lit. 'a trance fell on him,' indicating the initiative as God's. A trance, lit. 'ecstasy,' is common at time of prayer(cf. 22;17) and indicates readiness for divine revelation.[177]

Peter's vision is of a blanket like canopy containing various species of animals (vv. 11-12). There is no separate distinguishing of unclean and clean at this point. Characteristically what he sees is accompanied by what he hears: the Lord's instruction for him to 'get up, kill and eat' (v.13) the animals without proper attention to their kosher preparation as (cf. Leviticus 11).[178] Peter gives a negative response that reflects his piety as a Jew (v.14). Peter has never eaten anything unclean according to the Jewish laws of purity pertaining to what is clean and unclean. The subsequent repetition of this divine encounter makes Peter's response clear: What was formerly "profane and unclean" is now clean and no longer profane.[179] Therefore, Peter's objection usurped by the heavenly voice which informs Peter that the distinction between what is clean and what is unclean has

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[176]Ibid.

[177]Laymon, *Commentary,*742.

[178]Ibid.

[179]Ibid.

been abolished and is no longer considered profane.[180] The second repetition of the divine encounter (v.15) explains the first and gives the essential message of the vision.[181] The third time Peter heard the voice speak to him served as symbolic to the whole of the vision.

The exchange between God and Peter only indirectly concerns traditions regarding clean and unclean foods, even through this is surely what prompts him to "puzzle greatly" and ponder the meaning of this vision (vv. 17, 19a).[182] Comprehension unfolds only with additional information: Peter's vision concerns his mission to fulfill God's purpose that unclean (= uncircumcised) Gentiles will also share Israel's blessings.[183] Now Peter understands what the vision was about- Gentiles were also to be accepted into the community of believers.[184] Peter points out that God had shown him that he should not call any man impure or unclean (10:27-28). [185] This is apparent in Peter's mission to fulfill God's purpose in ministry to the Gentiles is made clearer in the larger discussion Peter's vision as depicted in Acts 10: 42, 43.

> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead, All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receive forgiveness through his name.

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[180]James A. Crampsey, *The Conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10: 1-11:18): Societal Apologetic and Ecclesial Tension* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1982), 16.

[181]Alexander, *New Interpreter's Bible, 163.*

[182]Ibid.

[183]Ibid, 163-164.

[184]Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1319.

[185]Ibid.

When embracing diversity among people of differing ethnicities, socio-economic classes, and cultures there must be an acceptance of one another. This acceptance of one another must occur on a level of being willing to understand and embrace our differences as well as our commonalities. God's acceptance of the Gentiles was astonishing to the Jewish believers who were circumcised (Acts 10:45). But clearly God was accepting these people without being circumcised.[186] As depicted in the narratives of Ruth and Naomi and Peter and Cornelius, transforming encounters must occur for this acceptance to take place. Biblical scholars Paul R. Spickard and Kevin M. Cragg suggests:

> If Christianity was a new religion, Jewish believers would need to change their assumptions and habits radically in order to accept Gentiles fully. If Christianity was a new religion, Jewish believers would need to change their assumptions and habits radically in order to accept Gentiles fully. If Christianity were a form of Judaism, on the hand, Gentile converts would need to learn many new rituals, study Torah, and face the daunting ceremony of circumcision. Pagan converts brought their cultural lifestyles with them into the church, and this caused great distress to some of the Jewish Christians. The phrase 'Gentile sinners' was, after all, redundant in Jewish thinking. Trained since birth to avoid unclean people, some found it difficult to associate with their non-Jewish fellow believers.[187]

The occurrence of these of transforming encounters of acceptance are not limited to the Sitz im Leben of the biblical narratives. The communal life of today's societies has also been affected by the socio-relational boundaries of exclusiveness. Acceptance of one another in regard to being inclusive is still in need of taking place in society as transforming encounters continue to occur. These transforming encounters will breakdown social barriers producing enhanced relationships as necessary for the

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[186]Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary,* 1320.

[187]Kevin M. Cragg and Paul R. Spickard, *A Global History of Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 32.

productivity of effective ministry to the masses of people. The production of enhanced relationships will often lead to long- term benefits. These long-term benefits will in turn not only build up the individual person, but they will ultimately build up the whole of a community, a society, and a nation. Transforming encounters have their most potent productivity when diversity is mutually respected. It is then that diversity will become a mutual commonality as it pertains to social barriers.

In reference to social and racial barriers, biblical scholar William H. Willimon interprets the Book of Acts chapter ten as a "Witness to the Gentiles."[188] Willimon suggests that Acts ten marks the beginning of the Gentile mission. However, Willimon goes further to connect the witness to the gentile to the witness to the Jew as it pertains to today. Willimon comments:

> In the church today sometimes the question is asked, 'Will the Jews be saved, even when they do not believe in Jesus?' The question is raised by one who perceives him or herself to be an insider concerned about the fate of the outsider. From the standpoint of Acts, it is a curious question. In Acts the issue is not, 'will the Jews be saved?' That issue had already been decided at the dawn of history by the promises of God to Abraham and the rest-God will have this people as his own. Every act of God since then, including the gift of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, demonstrates God's fidelity to that promise. 'For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him' (2:39). The fidelity of God to his promise to Israel is the very foundation of the good news in Acts. It was a fact that required little demonstration.[189]

The question of salvation has historically and theologically taken a turn over the centuries. Consideration of whether the Gentile will be saved has now raised the question of whether the Jews shall be saved. This question is raised today among Gentile Christian

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[188] William Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 93.

[189] Ibid.

believers who have accepted Christ as the while many Jews reject Christ. However, this is not a new phenomenon. The Lukan text dealt with Christ being accepted by all people, Gentile and Jew. The Gospel according to Luke 2: 25-32 states:

> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

In the above passage Luke presents a theme of redemption. The theme of redemption is a prelude to the establishment of the church whereby both Jews and Gentiles are apart of. According to Luke, provision for redemption for all people had already been established. Luke's writings emphasized the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Israel. But here was the church at the turn of the first century facing Jewish rejection of the Gospel, which should have been theirs, and gentile acceptance of a good news that was not addressed to them.[190]

Today as we view the Lukan texts, the researcher suggests that there are factors within urban ministry that reflect relevant issues pertaining to classism. Jewish rejection of the Gospel is parallel to the rejection of the Social Gospel and urban ministry by the middle-class. The middle-class has rejected their responsibility and call to administer to the spiritual and natural needs of the poor. It has been the experience of the researcher

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[190]Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts,* 93.

that ministry to the middle class in their acceptance of the teachings of Jesus concerning the poor has not been an easy task. However, all of the teachings of Jesus to the poor have been more readily received. So it is with the Gentiles more readily receiving Christ in contrast to Jews rejection of Christ. Willimon comments:

> Yet the contemporary interpreter of Acts knows that the church still exists in a confusing if not embarrassing relationship to the Jews. In what way is the good news of our brother, the Jew, addressed to us? How do we stand in relation to the people who first taught us to look for a Messiah? Few mysteries of faith are deeper than the mystery of why others are unable to see what we see, unable to have faith in the One who gives our lives their ultimate significance. One explanation is that we are religiously perceptive whereas they are religiously perverse, and Luke is not above hinting at such an explanation. Yet to say that demeans the very ones who are the source of our expectation and through whom our Savior came.
>
> Alternatively the one might say that now, after millennia of loving actions, God has at last rejected his own people....The church was rapidly becoming a gentile phenomenon, a fact Luke, to this credit, could still ponder with amazement and gratitude for the graciousness of God toward the gentiles, rather than with our contemporary gentile smugness. While Jewish rejection of Jesus troubled Luke, amazement at the inclusion raised, were Luke's main concern in Acts. The fate of the Jews rested as it always had in the hands of a faithful and just god, the same God who now, wonder of wonders, had made a place within his chosen family even for gentiles.[191]

Willimon comments in reference to the confusing and embarrassing relationship that exists between the church and the Jews have caused social inter-relational barriers. These social inter-relational barriers have led to attitudes of superiority among Jews and Gentiles. The sense of equality and equity are lost based on class, race and on the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior without the acknowledgement of redeeming grace.

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[191]Ibid., 94.

Therefore, we must ask the question: Can the Gentiles and the poor be redeemed? Also, in the same manner we must ask the question: Who is to redeem the Gentile and the poor? The answers to these questions transcend the social barriers of classism and racism. All ethnic groups have a social connection to each other through the process of redemption (both Gentiles and Jews). Likewise, all socio-economic classes of people have a connection to one another through the process of redemption. The process of redemption includes social interaction and acceptance of the one being a witness towards the one being witnessed too in reference to conversion.

In order for the process of conversion to be complete in Acts chapter ten the social barriers classism and racism had to be nullified through the catalyst of divine interventions. The visions of both Peter and Cornelius served in this matter. These divine interventions enhanced the social interactions of a Jew and Gentile to the point of mutual conversion/transformation taking place. Both Peter and Cornelius experienced conversion and transformation, spiritually and socially as a result of the dine interventions of their visions. The results of this social encounter is clarified in Acts 10:23-35.

> Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But peter made him get up. 'Stand up,' he said, 'I am only a man myself.' Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.
>
> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?'Cornelius answered: 'Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your

> gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.' Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that god does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

In the scriptural text above, an example of the mutual need for one another beyond the basis of class and ethnicity is depicted. The atmosphere of fellowship in the house of Cornelius made it most conducive for the social barriers of classism and racism to be abolished. It was socially unacceptable for a Jew to enter the home of a Gentile. Relative to contemporary thought, consideration of the social construct an urban church in transition has significant relevance to the previous stated scriptural text. There is a social divide between the middle-class members of an urban church in transition and its' marginalized community.

The conversion experiences of Peter and Cornelius as a result of a vision from God was not complete until social interaction and mutual acceptance took place in an atmosphere that was conducive for radical hospitality. The atmosphere of radical hospitality is welcoming and caring to all persons at all cost. Through the dialogue of Peter and Cornelius Luke creates a scene in which old divisions are broken down and these who once were at odds-Jew and gentile-chat amiably within the home that had been off limits to Peter.[192] Placed here, and treated in this fashion, the scene serves as a warm, touching hint of the joyous new possibilities for community toward which God is leading both Jew and gentile.[193]

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[192]Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts,* 97.

[193]Ibid., 96, 97.

Willimon responds to Acts 10:23-35 by interpreting the relationship between the visions of both Peter and Cornelius to their spiritual and social transformation/conversion experience:

> Both men have visions, both make speeches. Thus Luke highlights the dual nature of what is happening. Is this a story about conversion of a gentile or the conversion of an apostle? Both Cornelius and Peter need changing if God's mission is to go forward. What gathering first sees is the mighty Cornelius at the feet of Peter, worshipping him. Perhaps we are to read this action as typical gentile naiveté' about religious matters-a gentile will worship anyone (or anything) if given half a chance to do so. Perhaps. Powerful militarist Cornelius' misguided devotion, 'Stand up; I too am a man' (10:26). Whatever Peter has to offer this man, it is something more than the power of his personality. Then Peter speaks to the gathering, confessing that he has breached Jewish law only because God has arranged his notions of clean and unclean. The bafflement of the vision is resolved…As with Jesus, who was criticized for the company he kept at the table, so Peter could claim that 'there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Luke15:7).[194]

Biblical scholar J. Bradley Chance suggests that it was God who brought Peter and Cornelius together.[195] The researcher suggests in view of her ministry context that God is still bringing persons together of diverse socio-economic classes, ethnicities, cultures, genders, and ages against all human misunderstandings and resistances. The question at hand then becomes: What is the response of the church to God's prompting? Is the church on one accord with submitting to God's plan of unified diversity? J. Bradley Chance elaborates further in reference to the Acts narrative:

> The implications of this story can be both humbling and frightening. The idea that God really can offer fresh insights and directions that are so contrary to both tradition and assumptions of

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[194]Ibid.

[195]J. Bradley Chance, *Acts: Smyth, and Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, 2007), 173.

> the communities of which we are a part humbles our arrogant assurance that we always know the will of God. Yet it is frightening, for to move away from the comfort zones offered by tradition and community is perilous. We risk not only confusion ('But, Lord, I have never eaten anything common or unclean. How can you be asking me to do this?'), but also censure ('Those of the circumcision criticized him').
>
> One's conviction of the truth of such novel experiences rarely can survive unless one does two things. First, it helps us to affirm our own convictions if we can convince the faith communities of which we are part to rethink their own assumptions, inviting them to reexamine the bases of their criticisms. This what peter did as he shared his story. His faith community, the Jerusalem church, though initially skeptical, was willing to hear Peter and to acknowledge that God had granted repentance to Gentiles. Yet one wonders whether the Jerusalem community was really ready to accept this newly revealed truth. A few chapters later, in Acts 15, the issue of the Gentiles will have to be addressed again.[196]

Chance implies that communities of faith must take risk in letting go of our traditions and assumptions. In doing so, we risk ridicule and rejection from the status quo. Ridicule and rejection is often in the plan and will of God from the status quo or from those in higher authority. Our traditions and assumptions possess the tendency of being at enmity with the plan and will of God. Chance instructs faith communities to analyze and to investigate their assumptions, traditions, and root causes of their criticisms. The concept of discerning the will and plan of God for ministry must constantly be revisited by faith communities. Frequent evaluations must be done in regard to our social prejudices, inhibitions, fears and intimidations. This is to be done by each member of the community of faith. Chance further suggests in regards to our communal response to God from the perspective of other biblical scholars (Ernst Haenchen and Robert Tannehill):

> The action of God requires human participation. Ernst Haenchen argued that the Cornelius narrative so thoroughly

[196] Chance, *Acts,* 179, 180.

> emphasized the action of God that 'by the end of the story the reader will no longer forget that it was God who brought about the whole of these events: and thereby instituted the mission to the Gentiles.' Yet Haenchen actually takes issue with the seeming heavy-handiness of God, concluding that 'in all of us there exists a longing to have the weight of personal decisions lifted from our shoulders by abandonment to the will of God.'
>
> Other commentators have rightly taken issue with Haenchen. Robert Tannehill says it well: 'The narrative presents a more sophisticated and complex account of humans discerning the will of God than Haenchen thought.' Tannehill notes that, in fact, what we find are (1) divine promptings, (2) obedient responses, (3) openness to other persons, and (4) mutual sharing of visions, culminating (5) in public conversation and even debate (Acts 11 and, eventually, Acts 15). Discerning and carrying out the will of God in narrative is hardly free of 'the weight of personal decisions.'[197]

In response to chance: Urban ministries in transition are faced with various struggles of social interaction among persons of differing socio-economic classes due to classism and racism. However, relative to the ministry context of the researcher, classism is one of the major causes of resistance to the will and plan of God for potent urban ministry within its' urban community. There are many urban ministries in transition that God is prompting us to reach out to marginalized persons in a more personal and in depth manner, but we are often refusing to do so. Chance states: Obedient response to divine promptings is crucial.[198] Biblical scholar Justin Taylor elaborates in reference to Peter and the Gentiles responses to the Holy Spirits involvement in dismantling socio-economic and racial boundaries:

> So the Holy Spirit resolves the problem about the Gentiles. They are to be admitted into the community because the Spirit has sent them to it. They are no longer to be considered as impure people, contact with who renders impure, since the Spirit has

[197] Chance, Smyth and Helwys, *Bible Commentary*, 180, 181.

[198] Chance, Smyth, and Helwys, 182.

> commanded Peter to go with them as has even come personally to dwell within them. The second point—Gentiles are no longer impure—is underlined by the vision of clean and unclean animals that Peter is commanded to eat, with the revelatory word: "What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane" (v.15; cf. Mark 7:19).
>
> In this episode Peter undergoes real conversion, a change of mind and heart. The Spirit has commanded him to go the Gentiles. He draws the conclusion that he expresses to the people at Caesarea in vv. 34-35: there is on longer any distinction between Jews and Gentiles, but all are equal in the eyes of God if they live according to God's will. This doctrine is already in the Scriptures (cf. Deut 10:17; Isa 56:1-3, 6-7). Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Peter understands that he must welcome Cornelius and his friends into the community as they are, without obliging them to undergo conversion to Judaism. God has no favorites, makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, and gives the Holy Spirit to both (4:31 and 10:44). For someone to be pleasing to God it is necessary and sufficient to have an upright heart.
>
> That Peter would undergo a conversion after which he would "strengthen" his brothers and sisters had been foretold by Jesus himself (Luke 22:31-32). As Peter progressively absorbs the truth that Christ is risen and living with the truth that Christ is risen and living with the Church in his Holy Spirit he is able to throw off older habits of thinking and action—even those with the most respectable authority behind them—and to encourage others as well to live in a new way.[199]

In response to Justin Taylor: Every urban church in transition has a Peter. In other words, every urban church has someone who is bound by tradition and assumption that is hindering them from being a witness to the marginalized. Yet through the redeeming and transforming power of the Holy Spirit new habits of thinking and action are born. Likewise every urban church in transition has a house of Cornelius in its' community. Through extended fellowship on the part of the church those who were once considered outcasts to the church can now become fellow co-laborers and witnesses of the Gospel of

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[199] William Farmer, *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 1524.

Jesus Christ. In order for this phenomenon to take place, process of mutual respect, mutual acceptance and mutual bonding must occur. This leads the researcher to an in depth discussion of the theological foundation of the social issues concerning classism in the urban context of ministry.

Theological Foundation

"Love is a mutual self-giving which ends in self-recovery."
Fulton J. Sheen, *Three Get Married*, 1951[200]

Womanist theologian, Renita Weems, embraces the theme of mutual self-giving as she engages the story of an elderly widow at her church. Weems's relationship with the widow was enhanced through mutual sharing of the love of God which resulted in self-recovery for them both. The basis of these intimate encounters was centered on the sharing and listening of personal stories of the widows' life experience. These life experiences were relative to the widow's love for her deceased husband. Renita Weems was captivated by the depth of love of this woman for her deceased husband to the point where she thought of the story of Ruth and Naomi. Weems shares of her insight into their relationship as follows:

> Ruth and Naomi's story is especially refreshing because it is a story of friendship between a woman and her grieving mother-in-law. Their friendship is a welcome contrast to the numerous other stories in the Bible which portray women competing against one another for status, power, and men: Hagar and Sarah, Rachel and Leah, Miriam and her sister-in-law, to name a few.
>
> Ruth and Naomi's story is one of the oldest testimonies in the Old Testament to female bonding. Their relationship typifies the special friendship that can often develop between women, despite differences in age, nationality, and religion.[201]

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[200] Davis and Mesner, *Treasure*, 311.

[201] Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (San Diego, CA: Luramedia, 1988), 25.

Naomi and Ruth could never return to their former relationship to one another: mother and daughter-in-law. The men they once shared, the men responsible for bringing them together, were now dead.[202] Their new relationship would have to reflect their now realities.[203] Perhaps they could give friendship a chance. Ruth committed herself to a woman who, for all practical purposes, had nothing to give her in return. The young Moabite woman was willing to give up her right to a family – a husband and children – to follow an old woman to a strange land.[204]

Within urban church socially, such as changes in worship style and tradition; changes in the membership population on the basis of the increase and decrease of a particular ethnic, age, gender or cultural group that all contribute to the function socialization within the church as well as towards its urban community. These new changes bring about new realities that can be transformed into new relationships between those from different and contrasting backgrounds; as that of Ruth and Naomi. However these new changes are not without challenge and stress. Dr. Margaret Kornfeld has explored the concept of change in great depth: how it happens-for individuals, families, and communities. Kornfeld suggests:

> Change is everywhere. Nations in the world have collapsed. New alliances are being formed. Domestic social policy is changing. New needs are arising. In the midst of this change, religious institutions, too, are changing. Religious leaders are reeling from changes within and without.
>
> No religious group is without its experience of change…Mainline Protestant churches are growing smaller; Evangelical churches are thriving. Some churches that have lost members are nevertheless deepening spiritually because their

[202]Ibid., 28

[203]Ibid.

[204]Ibid.

> communities are becoming alive. Team ministries of men and women are driving into rural areas where churches have been dying and these churches are now springing back to life. Nondenominational and some mainline and Roman Catholic mega-churches, with their large communities and multiple staffs, understand contemporary mall culture. Through the use of technology and TV/entertainment methods, they reach many who have been alienated from their own religious roots. Some struggling urban churches have become beacons of light, offering comprehensive human services to their neighborhoods. No denomination or faith group is the way it used to be.[205]

In essence, it is often through change that we discover our purpose and commonalities. Persons whom we may have nothing in common with or have little or nothing at all to offer us, may indeed have much to offer us and have more in common with us then we may realize, as seen in the relationship of Ruth and Naomi. Pastor and Theologian Walter E. Ziegenhals has the following to say about changing situations in which urban churches find themselves facing:

> A congregation in a community facing or undergoing racial transition is confronted with a complex of problems. Normally, these include such factors as aging and declining membership; a diminishing financial base; insufficient or adequate leadership; racial fears (as well as ethnic, cultural, and class fears); movement of membership away from the church building; inability to understand the interrelation between the community's fate and the church's future; estrangement from new neighbors; concern with local issues to the exclusion of metropolitan trends; and difficulty in defining the mission of the church beyond meeting the needs of the present membership.
>
> In such a situation most churches avoid talking about the possibility of racial change in either their community or their congregation. They are unable to plan for change until the community is already transitional. Then it is often too late. To admit the possibility – or probability – of racial change in their

[205]Margaret Zipse Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005), 300.

> own area strikes most churches as self-defeating – the beginning of the end.[206]

In response to Ziegenhals, the researcher has witnessed the experiences he described within her ministry context in both Columbus and Dayton, which speaks to how widespread this problem of ministry is. The researcher's findings strengthened her project theory in that the same issues of classism were found in both ministry contexts. This phenomenon is critical to the analysis of the researcher's project. The researcher has witnessed the greatest area of embrace among the general membership of both ministry context has been with the embracement, concern, and personal inter-relational ties among the influx of the urban neighborhood children.

The children have come during the summer Vacation Bible School and youth choir rehearsals at The Hilltop. These children serve as the congregation's main liaison to the urban community. Though at Grace Church the onset of the influx of children drove many members away, the influx of these children have also driven many to embrace the development of new relational values; nurture; commitment; creative means of doing ministry; empathy; and flexibility that has become very visible within the fellowship of the congregation.

However, socially the same relational response of embracement was not as apparent among the adults from the urban environment that are primarily the marginalized single-mothers of the urban neighborhood children who come and are to a large degree disconnected with the social hub and network of the mainstream of the church's activities and general leadership. Most of the women from the urban community that have attended Hilltop have children. The mothers of the children from the urban

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[206] Walter E. Ziegenhals, *Urban Churches in Transition* (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1978), 15.

neighborhood are given food baskets and invited as special guests in attending the churches Annual Mother Daughter Banquet. Also, the researcher calls and visits the mothers regularly. But, to have the overall social relationships of the women of the church and community enhanced would be ideal.

The single mothers within the urban community of the ministry context are in great number. Therefore, the researcher's emphasis on women of differing socio-economic classes is a key factor in addressing the church's response to the urban community. The researcher also suggests that the church must not only have a theological response, but a sociological response.

Sociologist Ruby K. Payne has written a book that serves as a tool for learning and understanding "the hidden rules of class."[207] *Bridges Out of Poverty*, is a starting point where one can develop accurate mental models of poverty, middle-class, and wealth.[208] It is a new lens through which readers can view themselves, their clients, and their community.[209] Payne indicates that her studies assist readers in improving the inter-personal relationships and new program designs among staff. Her intent is to provide a starting tool for training for leaders in every discipline, including church leaders.

Payne connects her sociological analysis of class to theology by acknowledging spiritual resources as a part of her analysis of the hidden rules of class. Knowledge of hidden rules is crucial to whatever class in which the individual wishes to live.[210] Hidden

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[207]Ruby K. Payne, PhD, Phillip E. DeVol, and Terie Dreussi Smith, *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* (Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc., 2001), 6.

[208]Payne, DeVol, and Smith, *Bridges, 6.*

[209]Ibid.

[210]Ibid., 13.

rules exist in poverty, in middle class, and in wealth, as well as in ethnic groups and other units of people.[211] Hidden rules are about unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit.[212]

The researcher found three areas of Payne's analysis to be relevant to a theological analysis of the hidden rules of class. These three areas are among the essential elements of establishing inter-personal relationships within the social structure of a church congregation. The researcher found all of these sociological elements to be theologically relevant to the implementation of her ministry project. Payne discusses these three areas: spiritual resources, support systems, and relationships/role models:

> *Spiritual resources* are the belief that help can be obtained from a higher power, that there is a purpose for living, and that worth and love are gifts from God. This is a powerful resource because the individual does not see him/herself as hopeless and useless, but rather as capable and having worth and value.[213]

Payne points to spiritual beliefs in her sociological study pertaining to social class. Her above analysis proves that self-esteem is a theological and a sociological characteristic. The level of a person's self-worth and hope play a role in how that individual relates to another individual. The level or quality of this social interaction is influenced by an individual's socio-economic class and theological belief.

> *Support systems* are resources. To whom does one go when help is need? Those individuals available and who will help are resources. When the child is sick and you have to be at work-who takes care of the child? Where do you go when money is short and the baby needs medicine? Support systems are not just about meeting financial or emotional needs. They are about knowledge bases as well. How do you get into college? Who sits and listens when you

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[211]Ibid., 12.

[212]Ibid.

[213]Ibid.

> get rejected? Who helps you negotiate the mountains of paper? Who sits and listens when you get rejected? Who assist you with algebra homework when you don't know how to do it? Those people all support systems. They may also be role models.[214]

By Payne recognizing support systems as a resource for bridging gaps of classism, she is validating the efforts of congregational fellowship. Her analysis indirectly describes the benefits of being a part of a faith based fellowship. In a faith based fellowship mutual support is a critical part of it's' existence.

> *Relationships/ role models* are resources. All individuals have role models. The question is the extent to which the role model is nurturing or appropriate. Can the role model parent? Work successfully? Provide a gender role for the individual? It is largely from role models that the person learns how to live life emotionally.[215]

The roles relationships play within the function of the church are important in bridging social-barriers. Relationships are just as important in the workplace as they are in the church or anywhere else. The social repertoire of a community entails they relate to one another according to their role or responsibility within that community. The church is made up of a community of individuals who are both leaders and followers. The leaders are often seen as role models within the community of their faith. Throughout the tradition and history of the African American church, women have been primary leaders in being the backbone of the institution.

This does not imply that they were commonly the official or appointed leaders of the African-American church. What this does indicate is African American women have been the foundation for the stability, growth, and progression of the African-American

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[214]Ibid., 12, 13.

[215]Ibid.

church. Author Cheryl Townsend Gilkes has researched the sociology of the role of African-American women in the church and in the community. Her book is entitled: *"If It Wasn't for the Women... "Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community.*[216] According to Gilkes, Women's roles in religious and cultural socialization led to their participation as leaders for their entire community.[217] Gilkes states further:

> Black people not only built a family tradition, but also a religious tradition. The church was an important broker in enabling black people to resolve the pain and stress of death and disruption. The 'invisible institution' was open to the participation of women as religious leaders. Toni Morrison, in her recent book *Beloved*, builds on this tradition in her characterization of 'Baby Suggs holy'-inspired by Margaret Garner's mother-in-law, an antebellum preacher or 'preacher or 'professor of religion.' According to other historians, black women played prominent roles in the organizational establishment and cultural maintenance of churches. Men who left their autobiographies in the slave narratives attributed their early spirituality to the religious practices, especially prayer traditions, of their mothers and aunts, the women of their slave communities.[218]

African American women have always had a strong influence in leading their families, church, and community. However, their leadership influence was very often done from behind the scenes due to sexism, classism, and racism. Theologian and Humanist Anthony B. Pinn suggest:

> Scripture must be read and interpreted with modern eyes and in light of socially constructed power dynamics. In other words, this more critical interpretation of scripture is premised upon the desire of those in power to maintain their authority through any means necessary, including the manipulation of sacred texts. So, minority

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[216]Cheyrl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn' for the Women... " Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), cover page.

[217]Ibid.

[218]Ibid., 34.

> groups must treat interpretations of scripture by dominant groups with suspicion (a hermeneutic of suspicion).[219]

Certain leadership roles within the church were classified as designated roles that African American women were expected to function in. There were also certain leadership roles that African American women were restricted from operating in. The sociological construct of society influenced the theological perspectives of the church in their placing these expectations and restrictions upon African American women. For a historical example, "African American women were ordained to fry chicken, but not ordained to preach." [220] However, the kitchen was often the meeting place or the boardroom for these underground executives of the African American church. Such gatherings behind the scenes of patriarchal institutions ironically served in empowering women by giving them a platform for enhanced inter-personal relationships. Gilkes further suggests:

> The participation of black women in establishing the family and the church during slavery does not explain fully the collective ethos that binds black women across social class. Although their contribution to these institutions was and is considerable, another dimension of the black female experience must be taken into account. Deborah Gray White, the only historian to focus exclusively on black women's experience during slavery, has not only pointed to the centrality of women to the family and the religious experience, but also described and analyzed the life that black women shared with each other. It is my conclusion that the "female slave network" White described was a third institution that, together with the institutions of church and of family, fostered the physical and psychic survival of black people during slavery.
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> White argued that the image of black women as strong is an accurate one, but that that strength did not simply appear. 'Strength had to be cultivated. It came no more naturally to [black women]

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[219]Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Right Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 44.

[220]This quote is from the researcher's personal experience within the Black Church.

> than to anyone, slave or free, male or female, black or white. If they seemed exceptionally strong it was partly because they often functioned in groups and derived strength from numbers.' In addition to the work that they accomplished with men and sometimes like men, White showed that slave women spent most of their time with each other. They depended upon each other for medical care and child care. Within their network, these women created and maintained a pecking order based largely on age and occupation. Their leadership sometimes extended beyond the bounds of the women's network and could disrupt plantation operations. Some women emerged as spiritual leaders and enslaved women possessed a tradition of autonomous rituals and prayer meetings.[221]

The struggles of African American women created a common bond, unifying their productive influence within their communities. Their productive influence in the area of prayer was most effective because of the intensity of their struggles. There faithful endeavors were because of their determination to work together for the common good of their church community at all cost. For the African American woman there was no separation between family, church and community.

Many an African American woman has sacrificed her own needs and desires on the behalf of the upward mobility of future generations of African American leaders. Gilkes explains the background of the support system of African American women in further detail. Gilkes states: "The female slave network was necessary for the survival of slave women and their families."[222] "By extension, then, it was a necessary feature of life within the entire slave community." According to Deborah K. White, the female community was a critically important entity of the African American community. White states the following:

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[221] Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 34, 35.

[222] Ibid.

> The supportive atmosphere of the female community was buffer enough against the depersonalizing regime of plantation work and the general dehumanizing nature of slavery. When we consider how much more confined to the plantation women were than men, that many women had husbands who visited only once or twice a week, and that on average slave women outlived men by two years, we realize just how important the female community was to its members.[223]

Even after emancipation, African American women still mount the platform of assuming leadership positions in support of their families, church's, and communities. Their commitment before and after emancipation has been powerful, because of their female networking and female communal efforts even to this day. This leads to discussion concerning liberation and Womanist theologies.

Liberation and Womanist Theologies

Liberation theology comes from the black experience and which influences their view of God. Theologian James Cone wrote *God of the Oppressed* during the 1970s. Cone enlightens his readers by stating the following: "Building on my previous work in *Black Theology and* Black Power (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation (1970),* I sought to deepen my conviction that the God of biblical faith and black religion is best known as the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage.[224]

In reference to the innumerable struggles of African-American women, their view of God influenced their endurance, triumphs, and perseverance to conquer the injustices of racism, classism, and sexism. Therefore, racism, classism, and sexism have succeeded

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[223]Ibid.

[224]James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), ix.

in tearing down the female network of African American women. Liberating stories, myths, and legends are also found among men and women of all races and cultures struggling to realize the divine intention for their lives.[225] For an example womanist theologian Delores Williams uses the Hagar story as source of strength and self-assurance for women of color, particularly African-American women. Using the Hagar story, Womanist theologian Delores Williams challenges black theology's claim that the biblical God is always on the side of the oppressed, liberating them from bondage.[226] Cone suggest further:

> The black religious experience in the U. S. has a questioning tradition that goes back to slavery.[227] Slaves rejected biblical traditions which whites used to justify slavery-such as the so-called curse of ham (Gen. 9:24-27), the story of Cain (Gen. 4:1-16), and the sayings that admonished slaves to be obedient to their earthly masters (Eph. 6:5-8, Col. 3:22-25, I Pet. 18-25, I Tim. 6:1-2, Titus 2:9-10, and Philem.). They turned instead to the liberation motif they found in the Exodus, prophets, and the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus in solidarity with the poor. Both the black church and black theology are products of that tradition. No experience can take precedence over the truth revealed in black people's struggle for full humanity. The same rule of faith should be used by all oppressed people as they reflect on God in their struggle fro wholeness....
>
> Turning to Christology, I continue to focus on Jesus Christ as the starting point for Christian thinking about God. He defines Christian identity in faith and practice. Because I am a Christian, my theological reflections start with Jesus.
>
> The Jesus about whom I speak, however, is not primarily the one of Nicea and Chalcedon, nor of Luther, Calvin, and Barth. Though the dominant western theological tradition is an important dialogical partner, it is not the main source for my thinking about Jesus. For Christological reflections, I turn to the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul and of the Spirituals and

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[225]Ibid.

[226]Ibid., xii.

[227]Ibid.

> Gospel Music, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King, Jr. This Jesus of the biblical and black traditions is not a theological concept but a liberating presence in the lives of the poor in their fight for dignity and worth. This Jesus I wrote about in *God of the Oppressed.*[228]

Cones reference to the ways African-Americans have implemented the liberation motifs of scriptural text, reveals their creative and resourceful nature. African-Americans have theologically and historically always been able to find God in every thing. This stems from the origins of African theology in seeing all things as sacred. In African theology there is no separation between what is secular and what is sacred. God can be found in everything. Therefore the enslaved African and the present day oppressed African-American has always found hope in the midst of their ongoing struggles.

Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant speaks to the Christology of an oppressed people by paralleling their basis for hope and liberation to Jesus Christ's identifying to the marginalized. Grant states:

> Likewise, with Jesus Christ, there was an implied universality which made him identify with others-the poor, the woman, the stranger. To affirm Jesus' solidarity with the 'least of these people' is not an exercise in romanticized contentment with one's oppressed status in life. For as the Resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross for Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppressive existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation. Jesus Christ thus represents a three-fold significance: first he identifies with the "little people," Black women, where they are; secondly, affirms the basic humanity of these, 'the least'; and thirdly, he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence.[229]

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[228]Cone, *God of the Oppressed, xii.*

[229]Jaquelyn Grant, W*hite Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989,) 217.

women to find their own voice and to articulate meaning out of their experience. Their articulation was intended to empower, encourage, and heal African American women individually and as a whole. Walter Wink suggests:

> Until the rise of feminist exegesis, few scholars noticed how unusual Jesus' treatment of women was. Through the lens of feminist biblical interpretation, however, we can now see that in every single encounter with women in four Gospels, Jesus violated the customs of his time. Indeed, his approach to women had no parallel in 'civilized' societies since the rise of patriarchy over three thousand years before his birth.[237]

In reference to Winks comments, Womanist theology validates African American beyond Jesus' accepting them as women. But, African American women are validated in a greater manner by Jesus' acceptance of them as the historically oppressed. Womanist theology encourages and provokes African American women to triumph by not keeping silent. They are to share their stories with each other and the rest of the world. Howard Thurman speaks in relevance to the stories and the experiences of the disinherited being voiced and shared across social boundaries of class, race, and culture etc.: "This impulse at the heart of Christianity is the human will to share with others what one has found meaningful to oneself elevated to the height of a moral imperative."[238] In the next chapter, the researcher will provide her methodology for mutual sharing in small group fellowship among women of differing socio-economic classes.

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[237]Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology For A New Millennium* (New York, NY: Galilee, 1986), 69.

[238]Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976), 12.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Historical Overview of Research Design

This section is comprised of a historical review of the process that led to the development of the researchers' doctor of ministry project. This process began in Dayton, Ohio where the researcher served as the Associate Pastor of Grace United Church. The researcher was later re-appointed under the itinerant appointive system of the United Methodist Church. She was appointed to serve as the senior pastor of Hilltop United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio. This new pastoral appointment took place in the middle of the researcher doctor ministry studies. However, the researchers' transition from Grace UMC to Hilltop UMC served to be a blessing in disguise. The transition from one ministry context to another actually strengthened the basis for the researchers' hypothesis.

However, just before the researcher had a chance to implement her project, she would be re-appointed under the United Methodist itinerancy to pastor another church. She was appointed to serve as the senior pastor of Hilltop UMC, in Columbus, Ohio. This new appointment took place right in the middle of her matriculation as a doctoral student. This unexpected and abrupt transition presented the researcher with a challenge of her faith. The researcher trusted God and continued pursuing her destiny, becoming confident

that God was guiding her move to Hilltop UMC, by leading her to a ministry greater than what she could ever imagine.

The researcher arrived at Hilltop UMC in July of 2007. She had no idea what to expect concerning the direction and focus of her project. Ironically, Hilltop UMC was also an African American urban church in transition, predominately consisting of a middle class congregation. Also, Hilltop UMC did not have a strong connection to its' urban community. Ironically, the former ministry context of the researcher was also an urban ministry in transition, with predominately Caucasian middle class congregation that was disconnected from the urban community. The researcher immediately began a process of seeking God for clarity concerning the similarity between the two congregations, while also consulting with her doctoral Mentors for direction in finalizing a project focus, based on her observations

After analyzing the needs and concerns of the Hilltop UMC congregation and community, the researcher was able to finalize her project focus. Amazingly, the researcher observed that the social relationships among the women at Hilltop UMC were the same as with those from Grace UMC. The social interactions between the middle class women at Hilltop UMC were not on the same level of intimacy with the urban class women of the community. Therefore, by the grace of God, the researcher's focus for her ministry project remained the same: *The Exploration of Enhancing the Relationship Between Women of Differing Socio-Economic Classes Within an Urban Ministry in Transition.*

Even more surprisingly, the women at Hilltop UMC confirmed the researcher's intuitions by expressing a sincere desire to build a relationship with one another across

boundaries of class. This desire was expressed by both the middle class and urban class women within the congregation and community. However, the greatest and most enthusiastic response came from the middle class women of Hilltop UMC. The researcher had already begun a process of introducing the congregation to teachings on urban ministry. The affirming interest expressed by the women of Hilltop UMC was the spring board for the researchers' hypothesis: "Is it possible to bring women together of differing socio-economic classes by sharing their stories in order to enhance their relationships with one another?"

This hypothesis stemmed from the researchers' realization that classism was a taboo subject in the African American church and community. The researcher was quite apprehensive about proceeding with her hypothesis, in fear of opening a can of worms "in the church." However, the researcher was convicted by the urgency of this subject in being addressed within the African American in particular. The confirming response of the women was also an indication that the researcher was moving in the right direction. With the assistance of the women who would serve as Context Associates, the researcher proceeded in the process of approving her hypothesis: Is it possible to bring women together of differing socio-economic classes by sharing their stories in order to enhance their relationships with one another?"

Preparation

Preparation for the ministry project began months before the actual implementation of the project. The preparation process began with much prayer and fasting, meditation and observation of the social relationships among the women in the researchers' ministry context. Inquiry among the women of the congregation for their

level of interest in participating in the project was initially done one on one. The researcher spoke with the women individually and in small groups concerning the intent and purpose of her prospective project. The feedback and level of interest towards the project was always positive and with great enthusiasm. This process of inquiry led to the selection of Context Associates and project participants. Some of the Context Associates were also participants in the ministry project. Their participation strengthened the researcher's planning, design, and implementation of the ministry project.

Research Design: Recruitment and Involvement of Context Associates

The researcher recruited a total of ten Context Associates who assisted her in the design and implementation of the model of ministry. She did so by personally asking them to help her with the development of her project. The researcher also issued a written explanation to the Context Associates was done on the basis of :

- consideration of travel distance
- persons who were not caregivers of ailing spouses
- persons who willing to provide the researcher with ideas and guidance
- persons who displayed enthusiastic interest in assisting the researcher

The Context Associates were a combination of middle class and urban class women. They ranged in ages from twenty-one to the mid sixties. Some of the women were "Hilltoppers" who grew up in the Hilltop community. Because of the small size of the congregation, some of the Context Associates were also participants in the actual project. Also, due to inclement weather and personal crisis, the assistance of the Context

Associates was on varying levels. Anonymous profiles of the Context Associates are as follows:

- Context Associate A: middle class/ African American/ middle age/ retired professional/ married/ mother/ grandmother/ lives in suburbs/ Hilltopper
- Context Associate B: urban class/ Bi-racial/ young adult/ unemployed/ single mother/ pursuing GED/ lives on Hilltop
- Context Associate C: middle class/ African American/ middle age/ retired Professional/ college graduate/ single/ no children/ Hilltopper/ lives in suburbs
- Context Associate D: middle class/ African American/ middle age/ widow/ ivy league graduate/no children/ lives in on Hilltop/ Hilltopper
- Context Associate E: urban class/ Caucasian/middle age/ unemployed/ mother/ grandmother/ lives on Hilltop
- Context Associate F: urban class/ African American/ young adult/ employed part-time/ divorced/ lives on Hilltop/ mother/ grand mother
- Context Associate G: middle class/ African American/ single/ graduate student/ young adult/ lives in suburbs/ no children
- Context Associate H: middle class/ African American/ self employed/ middle age/ mother/ foster parent/ lives in suburbs/ Hilltopper
- Context Associate I: middle class/ African American/ middle age/ retired/ mother/ grandmother/ Hilltopper/ lives on Hilltop
- Context Associate J: urban class/ Caucasian/ young adult/ single/ no children/ un-employed/ lives on Hilltop

The researcher met with the Context Associates to prepare the ground work for her project. The first meeting was held in September of 2007 following a Sunday morning worship service. The meeting effectively took place in the choir stand of the church. Prior to this session, the researcher had previously met with Context Associates

one on one. Results of conversations from sessions the Context Associates helped the researcher to develop her hypothesis. They also allowed the researcher to sense the temperament and potential anxieties of the Context Associates. The researcher was also able to clarify any preliminary questions.

In the initial meeting with the Context Associates the researcher wanted to:

- bring all of the Context Associates together
- make the Context Associates aware of the doctoral process
- assure confidentiality
- explain intent of project
- relay expectations
- begin process of developing creative ways to share stories

Subsequent meetings were to be held after Sunday morning worship, in extra one on one sessions, and in small groups. Based on the responses of the Context Associates and the discernment of the researcher, this information gathering process served to be most effective in maintaining consistent participation and the avoidance of burnout. It also gave space for bonding with the researcher and Context Associates on a more personal and informal level. Sociologists Jacques Barzum and Henry F. Graff support the researchers' efforts in stating: "Meetings may run informally, and when done in smaller groups, it develops conversational ease."[1] One of the Context Associates sessions consisted of a sleepover at the parsonage in order to share with women one on one. The researcher was able to acquire creative ideas and input from the women concerning the project design. The Context Associates also experienced a preliminary fellowship to the

[1]Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (Belmont, CA: Thompson Wadsworth, 2004), 30.

actual fellowship of the five sessions that would take place as an actual part of the project. The researcher was also able to do some preliminary interviewing in order to gather a sense of the possibilities for implementing the model of ministry, as well as the needs of the women within the ministry context.

The Context Associates, Professional Associates, Peer associates, and Mentors all helped the researcher in designing the model of ministry. The Context Associates dual role in participating in the model of ministry impacted the level of commitment to the model of ministry. The Professional Associates provided the researcher with expert knowledge and guidance in the research design of the model of ministry. The Professional Associates and their contributions were as follows:

- Dr. Thomas Boomershine; United Theological Seminary Professor; expert in the art of story-telling; former urban pastor/ based on the personal experiences, Boomershine affirmed the need for the researchers' project in assisting other urban pastors and congregations

- Dr. Lisa Wolfe: former United Theological Seminary Professor; expert in women's studies; biblical scholar

- Attorney Clenzo B. Fox: Hilltop UMC historian; Hilltop community historian; biblical scholar

- Dr. Gwendolyn Roberts; UMC West Ohio Conference Head of Urban Ministries/ expert in church growth and spiritual gifts

The Peer Associates provided the researcher with critique, suggestions, and encouragement in the development of the model of ministry. The Mentors were the anchors that kept the model of ministry grounded within the perimeters of the doctor of ministry requirements. The Mentors also brought clarity to the researchers reasoning and understanding of the model of ministry.

Research Methodologies

Research, especially fundamental or basic research, differs from evaluation in that its primary purpose is to generate or test theory and contribute to knowledge for the sake of knowledge.[2] Research allows the researcher to find out information that they did not know before. Action research is a method for acquiring the knowledge of new information. Basically, research is divided into two major paradigms. These two paradigms are quantitative and qualitative research methods. Sociologists Michael Quinn Patton suggests: "A paradigm is a worldview- a way of thinking about and making sense of the complexities of the real world."[3]

Initially, an understanding of the difference between qualitative and quantitative research had to be acquired by the researcher. This was a first time endeavor for the researcher in engaging this understanding. Patton suggests: "Quantitative methods require the use of standardized measures so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can fit into limited numbers of predetermined response categories to which numbers are assigned." Patton suggests further: "Qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail."[4]

> Approaching field work without being constrained by predestined categories of analysis contributes to the, openness, and detail of quantitative inquiry....Validity in quantitative research depends on careful instrument construction to ensure that the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. The instrument must then be administered in an appropriate, standardized manner according to prescribed procedures. The focus is on the measuring instrument – the test items, survey questions, or other measurement tools. In

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[2]Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2002), 10.

[3]Ibid., 14.

[4]Ibid.

> qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument. The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing field- as well as things going on in a person's life that might prove a distraction...Because qualitative and quantitative methods involve differing strengths and weaknesses, they constitute alternative, but not mutually exclusive, strategies for research.[5]

The researcher selected the qualitative research method for usage in her model of ministry. This method was compatible with the personality, ministerial style, and ministry context of the researcher. In qualitative studies, researchers follow a flexible research design.[6] This allowance for flexibility helped the researcher and Context Associates to expand their creativity in designing the model of ministry.

Design of the Model

The researcher and the Context associates designed a model of ministry that addressed, explored and enhanced the relationships between women of differing socio-economic classes within an urban church in transition. The model of ministry would consist of five small group fellowship sessions, during which the women of differing socio-economic classes shared their stories and gifts. These sessions were to be designed by the researcher and the selection of ten Context Associates. The Professional Associates provided guidance, counsel, and knowledge of the foundation and the focus of ministry. The researcher and the Context Associates developed the five research questions for analyzing the ministry project. The five questions were:

1) Will the relationship of women from differing socio economic classes within an urban church in transition be enhanced through small group fellowship?

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[5]Patton, *Qualitive Research*, 10.

[6]Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource, 3rd Ed.* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1998), 7.

2) Will their relationship with God be enhanced through small group fellowship?

3) Will the women learn anything new about themselves through small group fellowship?

4) Will the women find the small group fellowship a rewarding experience?

5) Will the women express a desire for the continuation of small group fellowship?

The researcher and Context Associates prayerfully entered into this process. The needs and interest of her ministry context would prove to be a defining synergy for her chosen field of research. There were to be eleven participants in the project on the basis of the response of the women of the congregation. The five sessions of the small group fellowship were to take place during the season of Lent. Furthermore, the Context Associates would be expected to provide their input for the effectiveness of the project by rendering their support and encouragement to the researcher.

The sessions were held in the home of the parsonage in order to induce inter-personal fellowship. The selection of the parsonage created a more relaxed and personally social environment. Appetizers and a full course "soul food" dinner were served at each session. The Appetizers were to be served as a welcoming icebreaker and nourishment. This was in consideration of the participants enduring Sunday School and Sunday morning service prior to the sessions. The soul food dinners were in connection to the cultural and ethnic background of the participants, and the southern roots of that of the researcher. Soul food meals require instinctive detailed preparation being made from scratch. The soul food dinner also served as a primary motivator for effective communication and more enjoyable fellowship.

Each Session would be categorized by a theme. The themes were to be depictions of various creative procedures that served in initiating the Model of Ministry which was to be hosted and facilitated by the researcher. The researcher stated her goals, objectives and what she hoped to achieve prior to these sessions.

The theme for session one was: "Getting to Know You." This served as an orientation/ icebreaker session.

Session One

Date: January 20, 2008

Theme: Getting to Know You

Goal: To facilitate an orientation for the first of a series of small group fellowships where women of differing socio-economic classes within an urban church in transition share their stories and gifts.

Objectives:

1) To provide a platform for intentional fellowship among women of differing socio-economic classes

2) To provide an orientation of the ministry project process intent and clearly stated ground rules as affirmed by all participants

3) To get to know one another better

4) To begin the process of story sharing having the researcher share her story as an icebreaker for further sharing from the participants

5) To communicate on new levels

What the researcher hoped to achieve:

1) A greater desire for interpersonal fellowship

2) An increased interest about each of the participants

3) Confidentiality

4) Mutual Acceptance

5) Learning beautiful and new things about one another

6) The onset of enhanced relationships

7) A new level of desire to fellowship with one another

8) Production of an environment that would be conducive for open communication

9) Teamwork

The theme for session two is to be: "Let's Play Uno." This session was designed to initiate further dialogue and personal contact to break down barriers of communication. Playing this fun game in a creative manner was a tool for story sharing and reconciliation.

Session Two

Date: February 2, 2008

Theme: "Let's Play Uno"

Goal: To create a fun, non-intimidating environment as a platform for story sharing, dialogue, and listening among women of differing socio-economic classes within an urban church in transition.

Objectives:

1) To induce participation in story sharing by using creativity in the process of story sharing

2) To implement a platform that provoked interaction and dialogue on an interpersonal level

3) To produce an activity that invoked teamwork and team spirits

4) To ensure equal involvement from the whole group of participants

5) To alleviate the nervousness, anxiety or fear of participants in their involvement in story sharing

What the researcher hoped to achieve:

1) Informal dialogue

2) The exposure of a sense of humor to learn how much fun and enjoyable each participant was.

3) A closer bond with one another.

4) Increased inner joy

The theme for session three was: "Crackers and Cheese." This was a session that would be designed to illustrate the value of our need for one another despite our differences.

Session Three

Date: February 17, 2008

Theme: Crackers and Cheese

Goal: To creatively illustrate how our differences can enhance one another's life.

Objectives:

1) To discover the value and need for one another's differing gifts and graces among women of differing socio-economic classes within an urban church in transition.

2) To discover untapped and hidden abilities.

3) To demonstrate the power of diversity.

4) To affirm the value of the life experiences of each participant from varying walks of life.

What the researcher hoped to achieve:

1) A greater sense of self-worth and purpose among participants.

2) A greater appreciation for participants concerns, abilities, and life experiences

3) Participants gaining a greater appreciation for diversity

4) Participants being encouraged to use their gifts and graces among women of differing socio-economic classes in greater measure.

The theme for session four was: "Show and Tell." This session was to be a platform for individual visual/tangible creative expression as a tool for story telling.

Session Four

Date: March 16, 2008

Theme: Show and Tell

Purpose: To provide an opportunity for individual creative expression as part of the process of getting to know one another

Objectives:

1) To share story in a visually tangible manner.

2) To provide an opportunity for participants to share their story using their own selected illustration

3) To give an opportunity for participants to reveal uncommonly known characteristics and/or facts about oneself

What the researcher hoped to achieve:

1) The gaining of new and interesting knowledge about one another

2) A greater understanding of diversity in gifts

The theme for session five was: "Princess of Christ." This session concluded with a celebration party to affirm the women in their self-esteem and self-worth in accordance

with I Peter 2:9: "but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." This session demonstrated the non-existence of classism within the kingdom of God, whereby all are royalty in the sight of God.

The following outlines were the frameworks for each session as designed by the researcher and Context Associates:

Session Five

Date: March 16, 2008

Theme: Princess of Christ

Goal: Celebration time, to thank God and participants for their participation in the project. To equally affirm all of the participating women of differing socio-economic classes as Princess of Christ in the sight of God through the public recognition of their self-worth by celebrating God and the participant.

Objectives:

1) To nurture self-esteem.

2) To give an opportunity to show appreciation.

3) To bring awareness to the value of the life stories of the participants and there effect upon the lives of others from differing walks of life.

4) To encourage the participants to continue to fellowship and to share their stories with women of differing socio-economic classes.

5) To end the ministry project with a bang.
What the researcher hoped to achieve:

1) An atmosphere conducive for celebration

2) Feedback from participants of their experience during the five session

As previously stated, the researcher's data analysis method was the usage of qualitative research which sought to explore circumstances in greater depth. The selection of qualitative research made the experience of the ministry project more personal, which was a key component. Using several sources of data/information served in helping the researcher in discovering of her findings. Therefore, the researcher chose to use the methodical triangulation involved the use of three different methods to study the ministry project. The three methods used to establish validity were to be journaling, the researcher's field notes, and interviews.

JOURNALS

At the onset of session one a notebook was given to the participants would be issued a notebook for them to write a journal entry that would be their own personal reflection of the ministry project experience. The journal entries were accomplished during the participants leisure following each session. The journal entries were to help the participants reflect on and express their sentiments, inward desires, and inhibitions, issues, and concerns relative to the ministry project.

FIELD NOTES

Following each session, the researcher documented descriptive notes that reflected upon and documented her observations, experiences and findings relative to the theory of the ministry project.

INTERVIEWS

The final methodology was to conduct interviews. The interview process took place at the conclusion of the ministry project. This was accomplished in order to record

the aftermath of the responses of the eleven participants in the ministry project and to collect data for evaluating the results of the ministry project. The recorded interviews were transcribed for review and data analysis. The interviews were based on five questions developed for the ministry project: (1) Did you experience the enhancement of relationships among women of differing socio-economic classes? (2) Was your relationship with God enhanced? (3) What role did the mutual sharing of personal stories have you during the ministry project process? (4) Do you see a need for this type of ministry project in the church? (5)What are your suggestions for future fellowships?

To summarize, the ministry project was designed to seek methods for producing cause and effect within relationships. The ministry project was also designed for results to have been measurable. Chapter five reflects this endeavor as it conveys the details and analysis of the field experience.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIELD EXPERIENCE

Preparation

When initially embarking upon *The Exploration the Enhancement of the Relationship Among Women of Differing Socio-Economic Classes Within an Urban Church in Transition* as a possible project, the researcher realized that her ministry project was addressing the taboo subject of classism in the African American community. Furthermore, it was addressing classism within the church. Therefore, the researcher previously explained anxiety about the project becoming a possible platform for opening a can of worms.

However, the women who served as Context Associates and the women who participated in the project were quite eager and hungry to engage the subject of classism. The input and guidance of the Context Associates helped to make the engagement of the ministry problem at hand a smooth endeavor by demonstrating their willingness to engage the taboo subject of classism and to be vulnerable in sharing their stories with one another.

The single mothers of low income were the lowest in the initial response to participate in the ministry project. The women of middle class income were the highest to the initial response to participate in the project. The eagerness and hunger that was expressed from the women who participated in the ministry project confirmed there was

an even greater need for going forth with the project than the researcher had realized or assumed. Thus, it was with even greater confidence that I knew God was in the center of what was about to take place among the women of Hilltop, even the more.

Ten Contexts Associates participated in the ministry project sessions. However, due to travel, inclement weather conditions and illness not every single Context Associate and participant attended all of the sessions. The Context Associates identified six areas they found to be critical to the plight of the church and the community:

- Foreclosure Assistance
- Classism
- English as a Second Language
- Targeting the Unchurched
- Single Mothers
- Juvenile detention-Rehabilitation and prevention (particularly with young African-American males)

The area of passion of the Context Associates and the researcher's spiritual autobiography affirmed the focus of the ministry project to be classism and single-mothers. As a result emphasis upon women and classism within the church and community sparked the greatest interest in the Context Associates and researcher.

Field Notes

The ministry project sessions took place in the home of the researcher (church parsonage) after the Sunday morning worship services at 2:00 p.m. There were a total of five sessions conducted during the Lenten season. The first session was on January 20, 2008. The last session was on Palm Sunday, March 16, covering a period of nine weeks.

2008. The passing of the father of three of the participants, who were related, and a blizzard caused the postponement of two of our ministry project sessions. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm of the women seemed to have lost momentum. Each session displayed a new level of anticipation and participation. Each session also had a theme. The themes were entitled: Getting to Know You; Let's Play Uno; Crackers and Cheese; Show and Tell; and Princess of Christ Party.

Essential to each session was a box of Kleenex tissue and a full coarse Sunday dinner served at the end of each session. Great food served as a catalyst for great fellowship. The women voluntary prepared appetizers and fresh raspberry ice tea for the beginning of each session. The original plans of the researcher were to provide the meals so that the women would not have to do so, because many of the women prepare meals for the church so often, but they insisted on bringing a dish any way. The researcher's field notes she provided detailed depictions of her account of each of the five sessions.

Session One

Theme: "Getting To Know You"

January 20, 2009 was the first day of the researchers' Doctor of Ministry project. The participating women including the researcher (seeing how she is the project), met at the church parsonage in the comfort and welcoming atmosphere of her home for all five of the ministry project sessions. Having the small group fellowship in her home was a key element of the project. The welcoming invitation for fellowship in the home of the Pastor of an urban church in transition, to women from all walks of life, greatly

contributed in bridging the social relational gaps caused by classism within an urban church in transition.

Women were not just in fellowship with one another on a surface level as in a church meeting, or church service, but they were also in fellowship with one another on a more intimate level. The masks worn in church can be removed. The walls that are barriers can come. There construct prevent women from really getting to know one another. The invitation to the women from all walks of life, to the home of the Pastor, sent a genuine message to the community that all are welcomed beyond the doors of the church, and into the heart of the members and Pastor. This invitation communicated social acceptance in the body of Christ, where women in Christ are not simply associates or strangers, but are sisters and friends.

As the women gathered after church for the fellowship, they stated they were excited about fellowshipping with one another. Some of the women had been in fellowship with each other before (these were primarily the middle class women of the congregation). The small group fellowship offered an opportunity for the women from differing socio economic classes to get to know each other on a personal and intimate level for the first time in their attendance at Hilltop United Methodist Church.

The women participating from the urban community did not have cars to drive to the fellowship. The women who had cars ensured every woman had a ride to the fellowship and from the fellowship. On the day of the first session the outdoor temperature was six degrees.

Before the researcher could officially begin the small group fellowship, the women immediately began to fellowship and interact with each other upon entering.

Anticipation filled the atmosphere. While the researcher was in the kitchen prepping the meal, she could hear and see the women beginning to share their stories. They were doing so with great intrigue for one another and with bursts of laughter. The researcher could hear women whom she had never heard or seen fellowship in that manner before opening up to fellowship.

At 2:00 p.m., the researcher began the small group fellowship with prayer and praise singing, "This is the Day that the Lord has Made!" The researcher gave an orientation for the opening session with explanation of the ministry project sessions. This introduction set the tone for her to begin sharing her story as an icebreaker. Amazingly, before the researcher could get warmed up sharing stories from her life, the women latched on to her story and began to identify with and testify to what the researcher was sharing.

One of the women asked: "At what point in your life did you start encouraging others?" This profound question almost knocked the researcher out of her chair, because it came from a woman whom the researcher had never heard say more than three sentences. The question prompted the researcher to look back on her life in a way she had never done before and to give an immediate answer. When looking back at her life, she realized that she always encouraged others. Two of the urban class women shared how they did not receive encouragement in their upbringing. They shared how they were outcasts.

The women began to pour out their hearts to one another while sharing their stories. A real sense of a need for one another was expressed by the women as they shared their aspirations, weaknesses, strengths, goals, and dreams in a manner never

before experienced in a church setting. Another question asked by one women of the researcher was: "How does this project affect the researcher?" The researcher answered: "I am in the same boat with everyone else in experiencing new bonds of fellowship, as well as being equally vulnerable in sharing my personal stories, and facing the unpredictable response and results that follow." The researcher further expressed her inner personal need for all the women present and how their stories, gifts, and graces could enhance her life, spiritually, emotionally, and in many other surprising ways.

The women with children shared the lives of their children, miracle births, a son in Iraq, and grandchildren. Then of course some of them shared pictures. One of the younger ladies asked if the women could celebrate her birthday in church. The women shouted Yes! Consequently, the women baked cupcakes for her the following Sunday. She also asked for gospel music for listening. The researcher gave her a gospel CD. The women were helping one another with their diverse resources. One of the young ladies expressed wanting to complete her GED, One of the ladies who was a Central State University graduate, and former financial aide officer at Virginia Union Theological Seminary, offered to help her in completing her GED. She also offered to help the young single mother complete her financial aid document for college.

Everyone ended the Session One with singing "Getting to know You" from Oscar Hammerstein's motion picture "The King and I." The King and I is a movie which depicts the unifying of social relationships among contrasting cultures, ethnic groups and classes of people. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

Getting to Know You

Getting to know you,
Getting to know all about you.
Getting to like you,
Getting to hope you like me.
Getting to know you, putting it my way,
But nicely,
You are precisely,
My cup of tea.

Getting to know you,
Getting to feel free and easy.
When I am with you,
Getting to know what to say
Haven't you noticed
Suddenly I'm bright and breezy
Because of all the beautiful and new
Things I'm learning about you
Day by day.[1]

After the women had their Broadway song and dance moment, they continued to fellowship while breaking bread. When the session was completed they did not want to leave. They continued to share new stories and the next thing you know all of the women began to recall and to play childhood games: such as O Mary Mack; O Sailer went to See See See; and This is a pen! A what? A pen. A what? A pen. Oh, a pen. These were all games that required group participation and interaction. For the researcher, this spontaneous group dynamic was characteristic of the none-existing social barriers. The researcher also saw this engaging phenomenon as the women taking ownership and finding validity in the ministry project.

[1]The music was written by Richard Rodgers. The lyrics were written by Oscar Hammerstein II based on the book "Anna and the King of Siam," by Margaret Landon. The Broadway version was first performed at the St. James theatre in New York in 1951. The film version was depicted in 1956 produced by Twentieth Century Fox.

Session Two

Theme: Let's Play Uno

Session two was filled with even more excitement and enthusiasm. A few of the ladies would always arrive early to help with preparing the meal and serving the appetizers and fresh raspberry iced tea. The women opened this session with singing and prayer. The opening song was What A Fellowship[2]. The women always sang with great joy and expression. In fact, the women were on fire. It felt like the day of Pentecost. During session two, the women shared their stories through the method of playing the card game "Uno." This served as a creative icebreaker. The women were comfortable in the sharing of their stories. This icebreaker was a key element for fellowship, because four additional women attended this session that had not experienced the first session.

The researcher used the Uno game as a method of initiating story sharing by placing a deck of Uno cards in a basket and shaking it up. The researcher had the women to pull out a Uno card. If the Uno card had the number four on it the player had to share four things or stories about her or her life experience. Each woman got one turn. If someone pulled a Uno card that said reverse, skip, or draw four etc. then all had to adhere to what the card said to do. This method of story telling really brought the cat out of the bag. The women (including the researcher) opened up by sharing their stories and laughing to the point of tears. Evidence of the women getting really involved in the flow and fun of the game was vividly apparent. They began to share stories beyond the number on the card they pulled from the basket. The researcher allowed the river of stories to

[2]The official title of this hymn is *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms. The words were* written by Elisha A. Hoffman and the music by Anthony J. Showalter.

flow, because the Uno cards were only a catalyst and a tool to get the story- sharing going. The Uno card game method of story telling was not used restrictively, but was used with flexibility. Surprisingly, the women began to glean from the Uno card experience and asked each other questions about what each individual shared, displaying interest and a desire to really, really get to know one another.

After the women participated in playing the Uno card game, they broke bread and continued to laugh, sing and share stories. Once again the women did not want to leave, but felt comfortable and relaxed enough to stay and continue to be in the company of one another. In fact, the women stayed and created their own "After Party." The intensity of the atmosphere of fellowship was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Session Three

Theme: Crackers and Cheese

Session Three was again very exciting and with great participation from all the women gathered. After opening our session with a singing of "What a Fellowship," and prayer, the researcher distributed cracker and cheese packets and passed them out to the ladies. The researcher used the cracker and cheese packets as a visual and eatable illustration of how we are all different. The cheese is different from the cracker. But, when the cracker is placed with the cheese, something really wonderful takes place, and their need and purpose for one another is discovered. So it is among women from differing socio-economic classes. Although they are different, something really wonderful can happen when their differences are met and come together in fellowship. The discovery for their mutual need for one another becomes apparent in that…One woman possesses the complimentary cracker to another woman's cheese, and vice versa.

The women immediately caught on to the crackers and cheese analogy and began to add their own insight to what the researcher shared, while of course enjoying eating the illustration. What followed afterwards was the researcher's usage of the concept of the crackers and cheese analogy as a tool for story sharing in another form.

The researcher used a basket of blank index cards and ink pens. She had each woman to get one index card and ink pen and write something of which they needed help and or advice; encouragement; etc. The researcher gave the women ample time to meditate and think about what they would write. Then she collected the index cards with their written questions, placed them in the basket and passed the basket for each woman to pull one index card to respond to the written question or statement. The ideal assumption was that what ever was needed was in the room, among each other from different walks of life…Each has the crackers to the others cheese.

Amazingly, everyone was able to provide resourceful and competent responses to each woman's concern. The women would piggy- back each other in responding to a sisters concern. Even when some of the women did not think that they had a response to share they shared any way and surprised themselves of how they knew more than they gave themselves credit for knowing. The index card question and concerns were:

- How do you keep from over stuffing your house with things you really don't need?
- I need help with my fowl (cussing) mouth. I cuss like a sailor and not always thinking the worst of all situations.
- What are ways to replenish your spirit?
- How do you know when you have met the man God has for you?
- What do you do when people mistreat you?

- How do you get by the "color of skin" on a job or applying for jobs when you're doing your best on your job or looking for one?
- I have two teen age boys how and what can I do to make them like school?
- How do you help a child with low self-esteem and anger problems?

After we shared our cheese and crackers, we continued to fellowship over the breaking of bread.

Session Four

Theme: Show and Tell

Sessions four and five were held on the same day to make up the sessions postponed because of a blizzard and funerals. Session four was the Show and Tell session where the women were asked to bring anything from their life to show and tell about it. The session opened with prayer and singing Hosanna (because it was Palm Sunday)! During this session, the women shared in creative ways. One woman shared a power point presentation of three generations of college graduates in her family and a grandmother who was a matriarch of Hilltop UMC. She also shared a picture of herself from the era of her youthful hey day, which shocked everybody. A single mother brought her one- year old son along with her to the session. The women attended to him and not before long he fell asleep. Another woman wrote a poem about how her sisters have lifted her up and carried her through the years. One of the other ladies read the poem aloud for everyone to hear.

By the end of the poem, there was not a dry eye in the room. Another woman shared her old bible and story of her being called into the ministry. She also shared how her husband left her because he did not want a wife in ministry. Another woman

expressed how she wanted to be real in sharing her story. No one in the room knew she was a smoker. She shared her struggle to overcome this addiction and expressed a desire for God to help her. Immediately, her sisters in Christ immediately began to surround her with support and confidentiality, prompting other women to share their addictions and hidden struggles.

One woman stated she did not have anything to show and tell, and began to give a word of encouragement to another sister that was present. The researcher pointed out to her that her show and tell was being an encourager. In every session she had been encouraging all the women with her words of wisdom.

The last show and tell was a woman entering the room dressed like the 1970's with an Afro wig as with the Sledge Sisters CD playing in the background "We are Family." All the women danced and sang along…"We are Family; I Got All My Sisters With Me!"

Session Five

Theme: Princess of Christ Party

This was an overflow from session four. This session was our party for celebrating all of the wonderful things that God had done during all of our previous sessions. The researcher shared, regardless of our socio economic class, ethnicity, or culture we are all a "royal priesthood," in accordance with I Peter 2: 9. Each woman was given a beautiful gold crown. The researcher placed the crown upon each woman's head, affirming each as a princess in the sight of the family of God, regardless of class or race. One lady of low income said very proudly: "I feel like royalty!" She said that she never felt like royalty before that moment. She testified that she made reference to herself as royalty for the first time in her life on that day.

After passing out crowns, the researcher passed out thank you cards and pretty floral ink pens in appreciation for their participation. The floral ink pens were given to encourage them to continue to write and share their stories, giving attention to the fact that what they have each experienced had great value, especially for someone else. A group picture was taken of the women wearing the crowns. Celebration with continued fellowship with a soul food feast, music and balloons concluded the session.

Menu Selection Process

The menu for each session was intentionally planned to include soul food delicacies. One of the key methods for ensuring great fellowship was to intentionally implement serving great food (purposely made from scratch to signify a high level of appreciation and hospitality). The selection of a primarily soul food menu was influenced by the Southern cultural roots of the researcher, who was from the Deep South. Sunday Dinner was considered to be the top of the line or the five-star dinner of the southern hospitality. In the southern African American context soul food was treated as a special delicacy when served on Sunday. The primary African American cultural culinary interest of the participants also influenced the selection of a soul food menu. However as the reader will note, the menu was not limited to soul food only. The Context Associates and participants assisted the researcher in the menu selection process ands food preparation.

Menu for Each Session

Session One:

Southern Fried Chicken
Collard Greens
Candied Yams

Tossed Salad
Homemade Dinner Rolls
Homemade Pound Cake with Fresh Strawberries and Whipped Cream
Fruitti Patuti Punch

Session Two:

Lasagna
Tossed Salad
Green peas
Garlic Bread
Strawberry Cake
Fruitti Patuti Punch

Session Three:

Alabama BBQ Chicken
Collard Greens
Macaroni and Cheese
Pickled Beets
Tossed Salad
Dinner Rolls
Sweet Potato Pie
Southern Butter Cake
Fruitti Patuti Punch

Sessions Four and Five:

Meatloaf with Tomato Sauce
Mashed Potatoes
Southern String Beans with Ham
Seven Layer Salad
Homemade Yeast Rolls
Fresh Fruit Salad
Fruiti Patuti Punch

Journal Entry Analysis

Introduction

The women involved in the ministry project recorded their personal experience of their participation in each session at the parsonage. The researcher issued journal notebooks to all of the participants in the first session and explained the journaling

process to them. The researcher emphasized that there was no right or wrong journaling. They were to record their experience in their own creative and unique way.

In this section the researcher will provide an overall analysis of all the journal entries submitted by the participants involved. The women described their experiences in varying flavors and themes. All of the women gave very positive responses to their individual experiences. Some of the women did not wait until they returned home in order to write in their journals. They were anxious to begin journaling immediately following some of the sessions. All of the women reflected a need and a desire for the continuation of this ministry project to continue as a part of the ministry of the church. The researcher will unfold the responses of the women in an over all analysis of the data received and interpreting it as it is pertinent to the outcome of this doctoral project as further indicated.

Researcher's Journal Analysis

The first thing to be noted was that initially the women were some what intimidated by journaling. They were more way more responsive to interviewing and one on one or group conversations. However, all of the women were more than willing to partake of the journaling experience, which was a new experience for most of them.

What the women wrote in their journals were testimonies that depicted four major reoccurring themes such as: the Holy Spirit; laughter and fun; revealed strengths and weaknesses; and their appreciation and desire for fellowship and self-discovery with one another. Note that all quotes are derived from the journal entries of the women participating in this ministry project.

Reoccurring Themes

The Holy Spirit

The working of the Holy Spirit was a constant reoccurring theme throughout many of the journal entries. The women testified how they felt the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the duration of the sessions. They testified how they felt the presence of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding the fellowships and their interaction with each other as they reflected. The women wrote: "The Holy Spirit directs and guides you to do the things God wants you to do in life." "It can lead you to a brand new life, life with Christ. "It helps us prepare for everlasting life although every Hilltop woman is different; I have found them to all be women of God through this fellowship." "Today the researcher learned more about pastor Melody and about her feelings and way of life, and about her direction in life guided by joy and the Holy Spirit as is evident in this fellowship and wherever she goes." "I know the Holy Spirit speaks through her."

Laughter, Fun, and Joy

This was the most reoccurring theme in all the journals. The women talked about how much fun they all had from the time they entered the door. Many expressed how the sessions were like a girl's night out. They also expressed that they wanted to experience more fellowships with one another in the same manner. Some of the women suggested that they have fellowships away from the church environment in even more creative ways.

The women especially had fun sharing their stories through playing the games, as well as singing and dancing. They emphasized that the method of using the games as a tool in sharing their stories served as tremendous icebreakers. They also indicated that

researcher's personality, the anointing on her life, and loving atmosphere of her home provided a haven for liberty and fun in a very relaxed and warm environment. This atmosphere made it conducive for every to feel safe in opening up to one another for the effectiveness of the ministry project. In addition to the games, the atmosphere, and hostess creating a fun environment provoking laughter and joy, the women all wrote about how they immensely enjoyed the food and the fellowship around the breaking of bread. One woman noted:

> Sunday at pastor Melody's house, all the ladies there were very nice to me. We learned a little of the persons' history. We played Uno. Whatever number you picked 4, 5, or 6 you told those many things about yourself. The laughter of being around the ladies…I have never known or experienced. It was very nice. I never had this experience in any other church before. Black women know how to cook and set a table. the food was always very good. We talked about and danced to Old School music like it was a girl's day. The day was full of laughter, joy, and peace…and full of love. I wish every day was like this![3]

Revealed Strengths and Weaknesses

The women testified how they gained strength from one another. They discovered their own newly found strengths as well as weakness along the way. The overall strength of the women of Hilltop and their impact upon the church and the community was often referenced as being an important entity, as being greatly needed for the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The women even discovered their own gifts for leadership within themselves and within each other. The women testified and voluntarily exposed their weaknesses such as hidden habits, struggles, and feelings of depression and fear. One woman stated: "This

[3]Excerpt from the journal entries of the project participant.

meeting reminded me of how different my life is from most of the women." Maybe it is because this was the first time I have ever experienced anything like this type of fellowship in my entire life." "But I understood that one of the purposes of this meting is to recognize the commonalities of all women." "But all I recognized were the differences." "These women seem to be more accomplished in their lives, where I seem so unsuccessful." In the next journal entry of the following session she writes: "In the meeting today, I felt completely different and opposite of the way I felt at the last meeting." "I sometimes wonder if my mindset going into the group makes a difference…And through it all were tears and laughter, but most of all hope!"

Another writes: "We did 'show and tell' today and I was able to give a special piece of myself without feeling odd, although it didn't prevent the tears." "But instead of feeling raw and exposed; I felt loved and comfortable in my circle of women my newest friends." Another woman wrote about how the backbone of any women's ministry is prayer emphasizing the strong presence of prayer in every fellowship.

Relevant to weaknesses the need for forgiveness among and within the women surfaced in a few of the journal entries along with dealing a lack of trust for people who have mistreated them; and cries for deliverance and help with wanting to be set free from addictions and other personal hindrances.

Appreciation and Desire for Fellowship and Self-Discovery with One Another

One of the women writes: "It was very good fellowshipping with one another in love…every one fitted in…there were no Big I's or little u's." All of the women

expressed appreciation for the researcher giving them this opportunity for their unique experience of fellowship. They all expressed a passionate desire for it to continue and to include the all omen of Hilltop church. They expressed how amazed they were to learn of the power of simple fellowship in sharing their stories among women from all walks of life. They were also amazed at how easily they opened up to share their stories and to be transparent in interacting with each other...some for the first time since they had been attending Hilltop for many years. What several of the women wrote in their journals was they surprisingly found themselves ministering to one another. They became aware of previously unrevealed capabilities. They wrote how they appreciated the efforts of the researcher, and how they newly valued one another as personal resources to draw from, as sources for strength, wisdom, knowledge, love, understanding, and support. Therefore, the researcher finds it necessary to include the following journal entries that express these sentiments of the women in their own words:

- "It's amazing how through fellowship we can help one another."
- "We don't have all we need within ourselves…no one lives in a vacuum"
- "Pastor's attempt to unite her congregation is a positive way to promote communication and the sharing of ideas." "The way she openly communicates with her congregation is appreciated."
- "It is a pleasure to socialize and share a meal with the women outside church setting."
- "After introducing ourselves it was noticeable that there was a good mix of age, race, education, and social economical backgrounds…It was very interesting to discuss our experiences and to find out that we were more alike than different."
- "It really feels like these women from different places are my counterparts."

The researcher's experience in reviewing the journal entries revealed more than what she expected in that she learned new things about the feelings and heart of the women that were not previously known prior to this ministry project. In addition to what has been previously stated, the researcher has also learned about the aspirations, inhibitions, and miracle testimonies of the women, include miraculous childbirths and desires to complete educational degrees etc. The researcher was greatly impressed by the expressive detailed journal entries. The women definitely brought new insights to the insights of the researcher. In conclusion, the researcher's most heartfelt and touching response found in her analysis of the journal entries were the women stating their need to feel special, and how their need to feel special was met in the implementation of this doctoral project.

Interview Analysis

Introduction

The women involved in the ministry project were interviewed one-on-one by the researcher, in order to further collect data. The researcher conducted six interviews for this process of data collection. The triangulation method of data collection measured the results of the ministry project in various manners. The interview process enhanced the outcome of the journal entries and the researcher' field notes. The interviews allowed for more in depth exploration of the ministry problem. This was the original intent of the researcher's methodology and proved to be effective in proving her theory. The interviews were also intended to bring the researcher and the participant in direct dialogue on a more personal interactive level.

Researcher's Interview Analysis

The researcher used the same set of questions for each session. The women were very responsive to being interviewed one-on-one. Initially, some of the women expressed being intimidated and uncomfortable with speaking into a microphone. Some of the women were shy about speaking loudly in order to be clearly heard in the recordings. However, the overall attitude of the women was positive. All of the women were smiling while doing the interviews. The researcher noted this as tangible evidence of effective communication. Although some of the women were intimidated and shy about speaking into the microphone, they were eager to be interviewed and to respond to the questions being asked. The researcher used the same set of question for each interviewee. The questions were designed to be open ended to grant liberty for expanded dialogue. The researcher transcribed the interview responses. All of the quotations referenced were taken from the transcripts of the interviews.

The researcher has provided pertinent excerpts from the one-on-one interviews that reflect common and overall responses, that vary more so from the journal entries.[4] The responses express the views of the ministry project participant. The researcher has summarized her analysis of the interviews.

Interviews:

1. Did you experience the enhancement of relationships among women of differing socio-economic classes in small group fellowship?

Woman #1

[4]Many of the interview responsive were repetitive of the journal responses.

Her response was yes and no. She expressed how she got to the women better, but she expressed further: "No, because I didn't get a chance to deal with the people outside of the group." The researcher then asked her: "Are you talking about the people you knew already?" She responded: "Some." "My interest and desire has been stirred up to build relationships among the women of the church even more now."

Woman 2

"Yes, very much so." "Normally on a daily basis we see each other once a week on Sunday or sometimes, well in the choir on Saturday, twice a month...and when we get together for picnics. We saw each other regularly once a week and got to know each other much better." "We learned very personal things about one another. We spoke very freely and open. I learned a lot more that way. It brought me closer with those women." However, I still experienced more than words can express…Let's see here…. "We spent much more quality time together with different ethnic type of women at Hilltop." "I don't always get to experience such a mixture in fellowship." "I learned how every woman really is different

Woman #3

"Yes, I get along with them. I usually don't get along with women. They were very sweet and nice to me. I've surprisingly changed in that area. I've become closer with my family instead of arguing and fighting all the time. The church people care about me too, and I care about them."

Woman #4

"Yes, of course I did a great deal. I got to know members I never would have gotten to know beyond a superficial level. I got to know a member who I didn't really

know well before. I would not say that we are' the best of buds, but it was nice to know someone for who she is and what her interests and desires are and seeing where we have some commonality." "I was able to learn a lot of people I've known for years even better. They say still waters run deep." "There was somebody I loved all this time but I have a deeper appreciation for her now." "Usually I'm with all friends or strangers or people of a certain education level. It was nice to be in mixed company."

Woman #5

"Yes, very close relationships. We learned different things about different ones you don't know what's going on with them. You think your going through things and a lot of people are. It was a major blessing to do what we did."

Woman #6

"Oh yes, I really did. At first I did not know what to expect But, the experience turned out to be a blessing that I sure did need and desire. I just did not know how to go about making it happen." "I have learned the value of fellowship in the church and the value of women of God. I communicate more with the women of the church and am more involved in the ministry of the church now." "My goodness, I need these women in my life more than I realize."

2. Was your relationship with God enhanced through small group fellowship?

Woman #1

"My relationship with God was touched by being with my sisters." "I experienced God by fellowshipping with them. The fellowship in the pastors home made the experience full of the presence of God where we could all embrace his love and presence without struggle."

Woman #2

"My relationship with God was enhanced by the fellowship through each woman. The experience caused me to pray about a closer relationship with God and with others." Spiritually, I can now be more open about some of the things that I was not open about before." "I'm not fully disclosing my life but there's just some things that I feel I can say that I didn't feel I could say before."

Woman #3

"Yes, I learned we all need God and love the Lord. We face different things in life but God has a way of bringing the best out of everybody and helping guide each person in their daily personal life and walk with God." "All women have problems in their life and they are only what we make of them. Most of the women that spoke seemed to have an explanation and a way to carry on everyday and seemed to able to work it out with the Lord's help."

Woman #4

"My life has really been blessed since the fellowship began. God has poured out extra special blessings upon me, even winning $150 in a contest at work."

Woman #5

"Definitely." "When I was younger I wanted to commit suicide and all kinds of things. I finally turned to God after the last time that I overdosed and he showed me the way and the light." " In this fellowship, I experienced His same love for me."

Woman #6

"Yes, God was at the center of the entire fellowship experience…the whole time." "I will never be the same. Thank you Jesus for a closer walk with you and my sisters."

3. Did you learn anything new about yourself through small group fellowship?

Woman #1

"I learned from the sharing that no matter what station in life we are at, there are some problems that are common to us all."

Woman #2

"It was a good experience. There was a nice mixture and diversity of women. That made the sharing more powerful to experience. It was a great fellowship." "We were able to cry with one another, and uplift one another. That was a blessing not only to me but to everyone."

Woman #3

"It taught me the closeness that one could really have with people if you spend more time with them like we did each week, and all the different stories that they told. It taught me a lot of different stuff about myself that I didn't know."

Woman #4

"Now I can trust people more…love more, and be kind and caring and that they actually will love and care for me back." "I am more open than what I use to be in church now, Pastor Melody is the greatest pastor ever. I love hearing her life stories. They really help me" "She is a good person and loves all people the same. She brought me to believe in God and Jesus more. I love her for that."

Woman #5

"I did feel I got a chance to reveal another side of me that I have not always been able to do."

Woman #6

"Things I did not realize about the other women gave me more compassion for them. The stories brought us together in love. I always did love them and always had a good relationship but faithfulness of what we were doing just made us feel closer to each other and to God." "Each session brought new excitement. I loved the freedom of expression and move of the Spirit. That enhanced the bonding between all of us in a special way." "I felt really comfortable sharing my stories. Now I am used to doing it. I would love the opportunity to share with the women much more.

4. Did you find the small group fellowship to be a rewarding experience?

Woman #1

"Yes I sure do. The whole church needs to experience what we did, exactly the way we did it, and more."

Woman #2

"Yes, I think it would be very good. It keeps the line of communication open much better. People would be much happier and closer in the family of God."

Woman #3

"Yes, we need one another and need creative ways to express that…especially outside of regular church services."

Woman #4

"Yes. It was very beneficial. I would like to see it continue. Reason being, it strips the things that divide us and brings out things that unite us. Underneath it all, we're all women. We all have experiences that aren't always positive." "When we are in the church environment we all try to put on the happy face and try to mask the different kinds of pain we've all felt. We don't want to show that. We want to show the nice and pretty

stuff when we are at church." "That's one of the things church does not allow us to do; just to get beyond that and fellowship. It's important to get to know the people on different levels. It allows you to provide the support and community that you should have. There's just not a vehicle for that in the normal church structure."

Woman #5

"Yeah, I think there should be something like this at every church on a regular basis."

Woman #6

Yes, we lack adult fellowships, except for seniors." "We need to dialogue and share more without gossip or backbiting. We have done enough of that." "It's time to spend time loving each other in true fellowship like we have done together."

5. Do you desire the continuation of the small group fellowship?

Woman #1

"My only suggestions would be to add new venues, to go different places, to some of the other homes, to go outside and fellowship."

Woman #2

"If we offered a group class at church once a week it might draw more interest."

Woman #3

"My suggestion would be to do more social activities together that involved taking trips and getting to know one another on a regular basis." "I would like that."

Woman #4

"The fact that the fellowship lasted so long and you didn't have to put people out is a testament that this is a much needed place for folk to continue to come and to feel

safe and be open. Our future fellowships should always be small like ours was." "The women felt no one would take what they said and exploit it." "It was small and that was ideal. Again, it has to be safe. There aren't many places where you feel safe. I always believe that if the women in the Middle East got together they could stop the war, if they just got together in their kitchens. I understand the conflict that God had when the children of Israel wanted to have a king and government because it takes away from real communication and real relationship building."

Woman #5

"Let's do it again with pastor Melody continuing to facilitate." "She was able to keep things flowing extremely well."

Woman #6

"I suggest that we have a women's retreat at a resort to experience the same type of fellowship with women from all walks of life. For those who could not afford it , their way would be paid for in order for them not to miss out on any experience that God would have for them." "Money or classism should not deny them any God given opportunity for ministry and fellowship."

Triangulation of Data

The researcher used "triangulation"[5] in studying her project. This process involves the usage of different methods for studying a project and to obtain data. "These data-gathering techniques dominate in qualitative inquiry: participant observation, interviewing, and document collection. Within each technique, wide variety of practices

[5]Corrine Gleene, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 36.

can be carried out. Some of these data collection processes are more common than others."[6] Therefore, the data collection processes the researcher decided to use were: field notes, interviews, and journaling.

Triangulation is a method used by qualitative validity in their studies.[7] The researcher used various sources of data for this process, and categorized the outcome of the data according to common themes. The triangulation of data collection included researcher's field notes, the participants journal entries, and the recorded interviews which revealed converging comparable evidence of the researchers theory.

Below, the researcher gives analysis of the collected data by discussing the converging themes.

The common themes resulting from the triangulation of data by the researcher were:

- Enhanced relationships
- Spiritual experiences
- Appreciation
- Enjoyment of fellowship
- Classism issues
- Desire for further fellowship

The first common theme is enhanced relationships. All of the women expressed experiencing enhanced relationships with one another; the women described their

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[6]Ibid.

[7]Taken from: The University of Florida Extension: Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in an article entitled *Triangulation: Establishing the Validity of Qualitative Studies* by Lisa A. Guion, Ed.D. This Publication is FCS6014, one of a series of Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Publication: September 2002. Reviewed by Susanna Smith, Ph.D., associate professor, Human Development, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences.

experiences differently but they all told of a positive social-relationship experience within the fellowship. Several of the women said they got to know one another better. The women talked about their interest and desire being stirred up to build relationships. This was because of what they experienced in relationships being enhanced during the fellowship. Many of the women said that the sharing of the storied played a major role in explaining enhanced relationships. The interviews revealed that the open dialogue helped the women to learn a lot more about each other a great deal. One woman said in her interview: "It brought me closer with those women." Several other women testified of getting the opportunity to know women they would have never gotten to know beyond a superficial level.

Secondly, spiritual experiences were a constant theme throughout the data. The interviews and journals revealed the occurrences of spiritual experiences where the women were very open about sharing about them. One interviewee shares that she experienced God by fellowshipping with the women. This was the strongest common response in the triangulation in this general category. A common observation from the field notes was physical displays of thanksgiving and praise that paralleled with the responses from the interviews and the journal entries. These responses can be categorized by the third theme of appreciation

Fourth, there is a common theme of enjoyment of the experiences. However, this was the most common theme that stood out in the journal entries: all three methodologies reflected descriptions of how the women enjoyed the ministry project experience in their own way. The women spoke of enjoying the fellowship, the food, the stories, the games each other, Jesus, the singing, the dancing, and enhanced relationships. A large degree of

the women said that the atmosphere of the Pastors (researcher) home, the hospitality of the host, the great food, and the spiritual focus made the project a productive experience for them.

Fifth, the common themes of classism issues were recorded in all three methodologies in a positive way. The data that reflected issues concerning classism revealed that the women benefited and appreciated hearing the stories of women of differing socio-economic classes. One journal entry read: "After introducing ourselves it was noticeable that there was a good mix of age, race, education, and social-economical backgrounds…It was very interesting to discuss our experiences and to find out that we were more alike then different." Another woman wrote: "It really feels like these women from different places are my counterparts."

The data suggest that the women saw classism as it effects the social-relationships within an urban church in a new light overall. As a result, all three methodologies portrayed evidence of the women focusing on the things that they had in common. The focus on the differences shifted during the course of the fellowship to their appreciation of them.

And lastly in Sixth, there is a theme of a desire for further fellowship. The women gave ideas for future creative fellowshipping. They had a desire to extend the fellowships to all the women of the congregation. One woman said the fellowships strip the things that divide us and brings out the things that unite us. The fellowships motivated the women to take action in continuing the fellowship, and possibly serving as facilitators themselves. The women expressed moving forward as a united body of women. The theme of unity was a common thought as reflected in all three methodologies. One other

comment from an interview said: "Yes, we need one another and need creative ways to express that…especially outside of regular church services." All the women shared this sentiment, in some shape, form, or fashion as experienced in the data.

Summary

The researcher sought to analyze the enhancement of relationships between women of differing socio-economic classes in an urban church in transition. It is undeniably evident based on the data from three methodologies that the objective of the researcher was achieved. The data reflected an overwhelming response of the participants experienced transformation, growth, and new levels of a relationship with each other and with God. This evidence reflects the women of the church having increased hope, for greater possibilities of collaborative ministry within the Hilltop congregation, but absent of the social boundaries of classism. In chapter six the researcher will discuss the reflection on the field experience, summary of the project, and conclusion.

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTION, SUMMARY OF PROJECT, AND CONCLUSION

Reflection of Methodology

The researcher's decision to use the qualitative method of research proved to be ideal for the objective of the researcher. Her research questions were an indication that this method would be appropriate for obtaining her goal of enhancing relationships. This method allowed for liberty in creative expression in all art forms. It served to be of great interest to both the participants and to the context associates. The primary form of creative expression used in the ministry project was story-telling, to explore social interaction. Quantitative research methods tend to lack the depth of social interaction that the researcher needed in obtaining desired data. Two of the key factors in the researcher's methodology were creativity and flexibility.

The Context Associates played a major role in keeping the researcher on track. They were the checks and balances in being a confirmation and advisor during the ministry project process. There input gave the researcher greater clarity of thought and encouragement to go forward when she experienced moments of discouragement. Also, the enthusiasm of the participants heightened the intensity of the outcome of her research. The sense of unity among the researcher, the Context Associates, and the participants kept the momentum of the project going strongly. This was a critical element in the success of the ministry project.

Summary of Ministry Project

The ministry project began to take form when the researcher wrote her spiritual autobiography at the beginning of the Doctor of Ministry process. It later became apparent to the researcher that her project should deal with encouraging and empowering women. After completing a detailed analysis of her ministry context, the issues of classism were revealed as being present and a social barrier in the relationships of women in her urban contexts of ministry. The researcher's theory addressed an area that was of great passion to her as well as the Context Associates, and the participants.

The researcher used storytelling as a primary tool for engaging the women in dialogue and social interaction. In addition she used various creative methods of storytelling or "story-sharing" that enhanced the process of bonding and in depth fellowship. These story-sharing methods involved music, games, dancing, and singing. The story-sharing also involved sharing personal experiences; talents, and abilities at the liberty and willingness of the participant. Amazingly, the project produced great results of enhanced relationships, as reflected in chapter five of the field experience.

In response to the aftermath of the field experience, it is clear that the women experienced enhanced relationships. There has been a substantial increase in the participation of the urban women in the ministries of the church. Before urban class women participated in the ministry project they did not participate in any facet of the ministry, only the middle class women did. Now the women from the urban community have joined the choir,/ praise team, served as worship leaders, and have served in the children's moments. Before, the urban class women were shy and quiet. After the project they are now outspoken and becoming leaders in the church. The key component is that

they are being well accepted and encouraged to flourish by their middleclass sisters to the point where class is becoming no longer issue at Hilltop.

The Model of Ministry utilized achieved a greater sense of unity among the women of Hilltop UMC that were of differing socio-economic classes. To recap the researcher's explanation of the social relationships that existed within her ministry context among these women, their social interaction with one another was on a minimal basis.

The middle class women related intimately with one another. For instance, the middle class women of the ministry context were long time members of Hilltop UMC. Because of the fact, they were well acquainted with one another. Some of them have known each other since childhood. The middle class women socialized with one another outside the fellowship of the church namely, going out to dinner and to the movies with another. Many of the middle class women are actively involved in the women's auxiliary of the church that also grants them opportunities for intimate fellowship.

The irony in the various dimensions of fellowship of the middle class women among themselves is that, they testified of how the ministry project brought even "them" closer together. In essence, what the researcher unexpectedly discovered was that "enhanced relationships was needed and desired amongst the middle class women as well." The inner circle of the middle class women obviously had an inner circle within itself. Though the researchers' emphasis was on the enhanced relationships among women of differing socio-economic classes, there existed social needs on other levels.

Author Emile M. Townes is the editor for her book entitled, *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspective on Hope, Salvation and Transformation.* Townes suggests the following:

> Our failure to love others as ourselves and ourselves as well has led to a spiritual impoverishment that threatens the very structure of our church and society. It is time for us to look behind the exclusive definitions of White or Black or Latino or Asian or Native American, beyond the labels of conservative, moderate, or liberal, beyond male and female, to a new perspective which brings us together across the barriers of nation, race, or class, and gender. It is time to clothe the 'naked public square,' not by denouncing to pressure tactics on others who are not of our faith, not by denouncing those who may or may not believe in God as they choose, but by 'defending the faith that is ours' (1 Peter 1:5), by clothing ourselves not with self-righteousness but with the love of God-to stand as defenders of the poor and hungry, those in prisons and on the streets, those used in our society.
>
> We must live our lives, both publicly and privately, in the same subversive manner that Jesus Christ led his. For our God is a God who takes sides, the side of those most in need, to bring 'the mighty from their thrones/ and [exalt] those of low degree' (Luke 1:52-53), as Mary proclaims in her song. He is God who 'preached good news to the poor' and release to those in chains, whether physical ones or those of the mind and soul. To subvert means to turn reality upside down, to look at it in another light, to confound those who believe they are the only source of truth by presenting another, more far-reaching and earth-shattering truth. Sojourner Truth knew well the meaning of a subversive faith, noting that 'if the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone; together women ought to able to turn it right side up again.'[1]

Townes addresses the significance and strength of enhanced relationships beyond the barriers of class, race, and gender. She begins her focus with love and appreciation of self, and of others, across these same barriers. The researcher's efforts to unify the social relationships among women of differing socio-economic classes are to acknowledge the

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[1]Emile M. Townes, *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 23, 24.

power that women possess as a unified force within their perspective families, communities, and churches.

Is this Project Replicable?

Yes, the researchers claim is that this project is replicable. The reader should be open to creativity in custom designing their model of ministry in accordance with the character of their own ministry context. However, the researcher suggests that there are key elements that are beneficial for achieving the same results as the researcher such as:

- The facilitator must be warm and friendly to all participants
- Great hospitality
- Atmosphere of love and acceptance for all
- …must be open to creativity
- …must not be restricted to structure (program subject to change by the Holy Ghost
- …must be flexible and sensitive to the participants feelings and flow of the Spirit
- …must be a good listener
- Be willing to be vulnerable
- Great food/ice cold beverages (and plenty of it)
- Must have comfortable and welcoming environment
- Confidentiality a must

What the Researcher would have done Differently

- Conducted interviews immediately following each session
- Power point presentation

- More teaching on journaling
- Tape recorded life stories of the Context Associates and participants

Recommendations for Further Study

The researcher recommends further study in the church related gifts of persons from different walks. The study of how differing cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds influence them would raise awareness and understanding of these gifts within a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic church. For instance, there exist unique and unconventional spiritual gifts according to age groups, geographical regions, and ethnicities; such as: Hip Hop, shape note singing, country music, urban gospel, traditional gospel, jubilee singing, miming and stepping etc. The acceptance of the innovative and "seemingly" secular gifts of persons of a different culture can produce controversy within congregations.

Also, acceptance of the unique gifts of others signifies the acceptance of that individual. The researcher proposes that the gifts of an individual are fused with the identity of who they are, even in Christ. Therefore, based also on what the researcher has experienced in her model of ministry, she raises the following hypothesis: "Are all gifts welcome in God's house?" The researcher's answer is no.

The Researcher is the Project

The doctor of ministry process has been a watershed event in the life of the researcher. It has catapulted her into a new dimension of understanding, patience, faith, endurance and trust in God. God's grace has been sufficient in enduring the struggles of the peer learning experience. However, the struggles have been the primary basis for the

growth and transformation of the researcher, as she underwent the challenging trenches of the doctoral process.

Because of the supporting academic and spiritual insights of the researcher's mentors and peers, she was able to endure the trenches of discouragement, fear, and challenge. The researcher continued to press through these trenches from one phase to another phase because of the supportive sessions of dialogue and fellowship that were experienced as a peer group. The process of peer learning has been an essential element in developing the project, as well as the personal growth of the researcher. Without the element of peer learning the process of discovering the researcher's deep inward passions for ministry on a new level relative to the future her divine purpose would be lost.

One of the first steps in participating in the doctor of ministry process of peer learning is the candidate must be willing to submit to and trust the process. From the intensive sessions to the peer group sessions. From the breaking of bread together to praying together; From disagreeing to agreeing with each other; From crying and laughing together; From traveling to each peer learning site; to standing still and knowing that God is God; From being confused, to gaining understanding; From doubt to hope; all of these experiences and more played an intricate part in pushing the researcher to the next level of her destiny.

What the researcher discovered, through this doctoral process, was that she really is the Project. All of what she has experienced thus far has not been by chance or in vain. All of what the researcher has experienced thus far has dynamically affected the core of her innermost being in ways that are yet to be revealed. The researcher's experience of implementing the ministry project in her context of ministry has given her greater

passion, empathy, and motivation in using her gifts and graces with greater fervor within the urban context of ministry.

The researcher did not realize until now, that she has been experiencing throughout this process the preparation for a Revival that has taken place within her; within her ministry context; and eventually spreading into the public square of the city of Columbus, Ohio and finally the world. The researcher's ministry context is presently experiencing the onsets of a Revival fire that began with the sparks from the doctor of ministry fellowship among the women, where the women connected together as in the revival of Ezekiel chapter 37 in the valley of bones, whereby the Spirit of God resurrected and connected bones from diverse parts of the body (a similitude of the body of Christ) together. They became unified as a great army despite the diversity of their anatomical function.

This phenomenon is also in the similitude of the Old Methodist Camp meetings of the 1800's, whereby class and race were not an issue, as Whites and Blacks; rich and poor, enslaved and free fellowshipped together. The sparks of revival fire that were ignited by the Spirit of God during the ministry project released an excitement that has filled the congregation with a greater passion for Jesus Christ and fellowship with one another. Fellowship with all of humankind ensures fellowship with entertaining angels unaware. From there the sparks have spread to the rest of the congregation, even to the point of beginning a weekly 6:00 a.m. prayer service. Hilltop UMC is experiencing fellowship with a greater diversity of people from all walks of life, including, the deaf, the dumb, and the homeless. Also, members of the West and East African, Appalachian,

and Hispanic communities are on the horizon of enjoining the fellowship of Hilltop UMC as well.

Summary

Though the researcher's upbringing is of a middle class background, she has embraced even more the Spirit of Revival that has been revealed and awakened within her through this doctoral project. The Spirit of Revival embraces all people. When the researcher reviews her Spiritual Autobiography she realizes that she was born with the Spirit of Revival. According to those who have known her, she always had the ability to adhere to the call of God in order to reach and be reached by all persons from all walks of life. Reaching and connecting with the marginalized of society is of a particular interest of the researcher.

As a result of this ministry project, she has embarked upon an even greater pastoral and evangelistic call to urban ministry which entails a greater sense of addressing the barriers of classism within an urban church in transition and within the entire body of Christ. The researcher's Context Associates have inspired her to do so by their expressed desire and need for enhanced relationships between differing socio-economic classes to occur. Upon witnessing all that has been birthed within her and within her Context Associates as a result of this ministry project; the researcher realizes the potential for greater levels of ministry that can evolve from inter-personal relationships not only with God, but also with one another.

"Can any good thing come out of the researcher?" The researcher concludes: "Yes, this phenomenon can take place "anywhere" and at "anytime." In essence, mutual transformation can take place within all of the project participants, regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity or culture within oneself as influenced by another.

Conclusion

Through this doctoral experience the researcher has learned that she is unstoppable in pursuing her destiny as it affects those from all walks of life. The researcher has learned who she is to become, and what God has given her to say. She is going to come about as a result of interpersonal relationships and encounters with of others from all walks of life.

The researcher's future encounters with social diversity will continue to affect her life and ministry. These social interactions are destined to bring about inward change and outward manifestations of the Glory of God that will greatly influence her ministry. As a result, the researcher will serve in even greater capacities, becoming a more profound and prophetic witness in the public square. However, the implementation of this project must not be limited to impacting its surrounding community, but it must also have a global impact, even among Third World countries. Henceforth, the researcher feels that she has been empowered by God on a whole new level through the endeavor this Doctor of Ministry project to empower the marginalized around the world.

APPENDIX A

CONTEXT ASSOCIATE AGREEMENT LETTER

HILLTOP UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Rev. Melody J. Williams, Pastor
99 South Highland Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43223

To: Context Associates
From: Pastor Melody Williams
Re: Participation in Doctor of Ministry Project
Date: September 9, 2007

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This letter is to formally request your participation in assisting me with my doctor of ministry project. This endeavor is a collaborative group effort that will require meeting together. We will be expected to stay in constant communication with one another concerning the development and implementation of the doctor of ministry project. Confidentiality will be assured during this process. Also, understanding and flexibility of your participation will be granted due to personal situations and inclement weather conditions. As the researcher, I am looking forward to meeting with you over the next few months as we engage this process of learning together.

Respectfully submitted,

Pastor Melody Williams

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